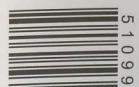


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Average high-school student Midori Shinomura falls mysteriously ill. While she wastes away in a hospital, she learns of another Midori—a fighter of terrible skill in the online game known as The World. There is a strange and close connection between both Midori Shinomura and game-Midori. With the sanity of both girls on the line, game-Midori will try to solve the mysteries of her past, and perhaps save the real-world Midori in the process.



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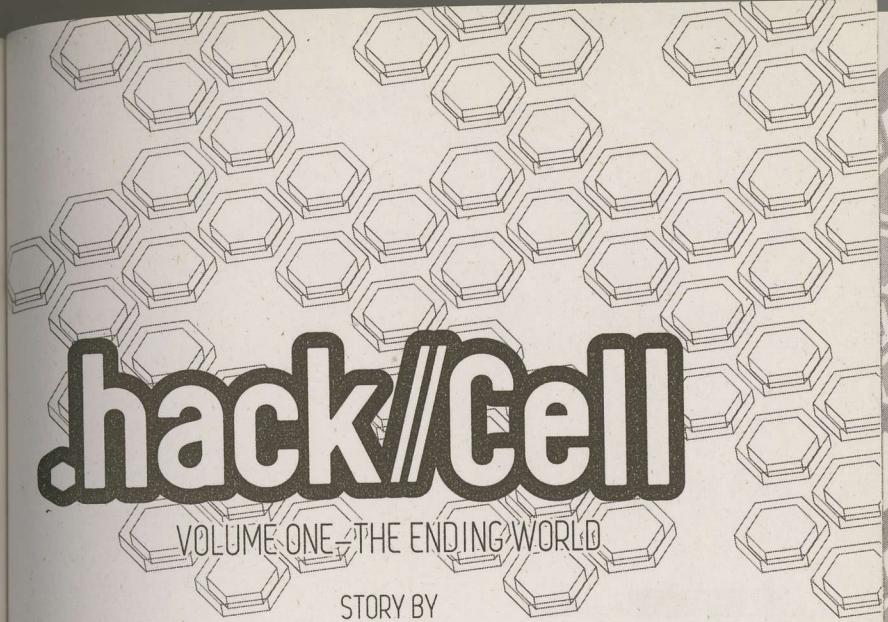
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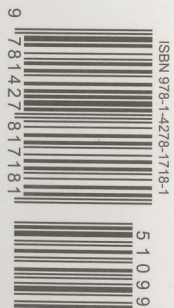


.hack//Cell

VOLUME ONE THE ENDING WORLD

STORY BY
RYO SUZUKAZE

ILLUSTRATED BY
AKIRA MUTSUKI



A  TOKYOPOP Prose Novel

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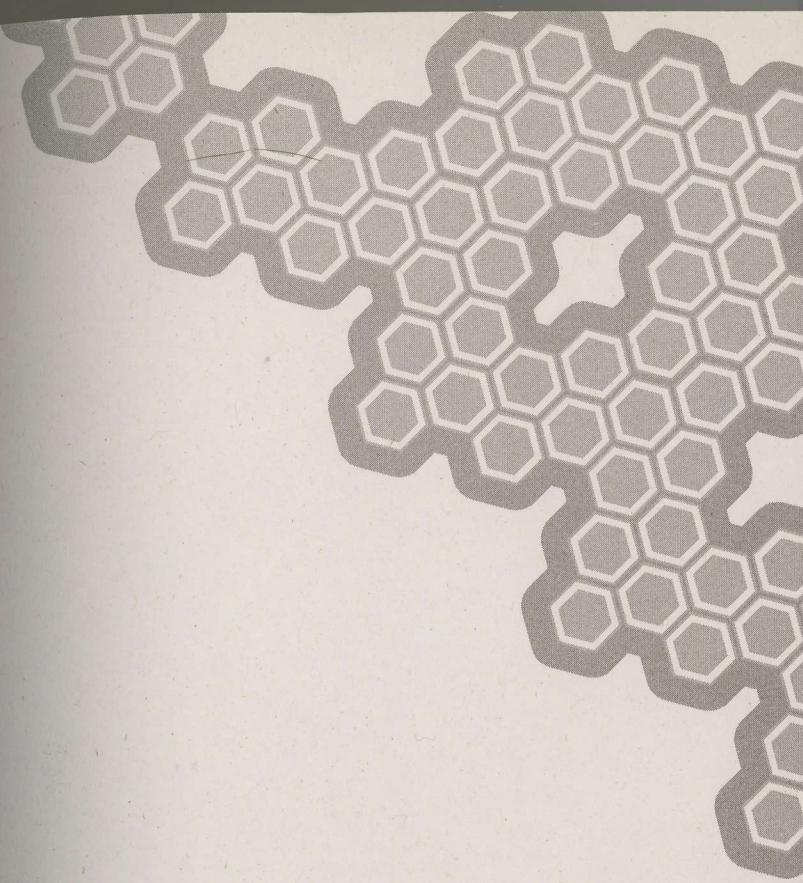
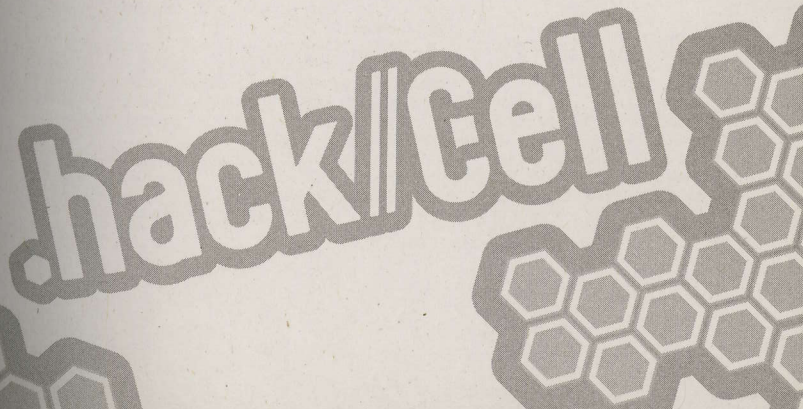
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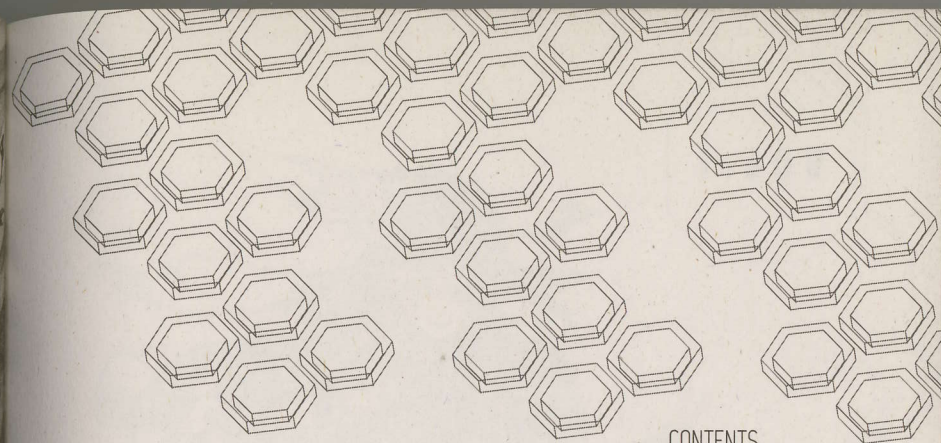





"Thus
we
rep-
resent
our-
selves-
he, by
giving
death,
and me,
by ap-
proach-
ing it."



"Who...
am I?"



CONTENTS

Vol. 1 ● 009

Vol. 2 ● 041

Vol. 3 ● 073

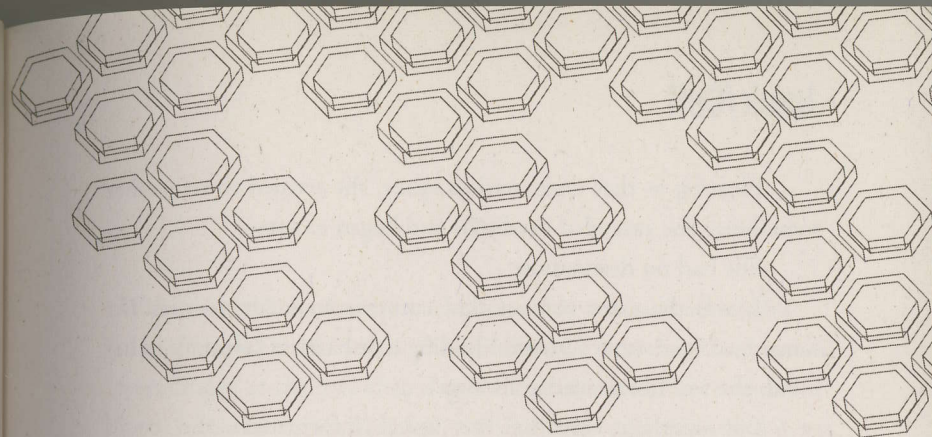
Vol. 4 ● 105

Vol. 5 ● 137

Vol. 6 ● 169

Afterword ● 201

VOL. 1



VOL. 1

It was within the darkest depths of despair that *she* was born.

There was no celebration, but neither was her arrival cursed; it was merely sudden.

There was no babe's cry—no joyful exclamation at her birth, no mew of hatred, no voice echoing through the world.

And that was to be expected. She had no organ with which to give rise to any voice. She extended a pseudopod, wriggled; hers was a primeval ugliness.

Yet within that unearthly squirming, she had a mind. Incomplete though she was, she knew and could express happiness, anger, and suffering. Her body overflowed with joy, quivering with it. Her own existence bent the very laws of the universe—it was a series of coincidences so unlikely that it seemed a miracle had given rise to her birth. There was no greater happiness.

Floating in that dark, starless space, she seemed to remember something. She extended her limbs and began to move.

She had no destination.

It was the same instinct that compels an infant to seek the warmth of its mother's breast. Holding that baseless certainty in her mind, she was like a maiden in love.

But—perhaps because the visual information she could gather was so meager—there was no sensation of forward progress. Whether her senses were not functioning normally or there was nothing there to sense—or both—she could not see ahead.

How much time had passed? A moment? A day? It felt like an eternity, except that the concept of time itself was uncertain.

But the world was not quite infinite. She continued forward, distantly forward. There at the edge of the vastness floated a pinprick of light. It was minute, almost not there at all—yet it did exist. It was the beacon that led her.

Gradually, ever so slowly, she was drawn to the light. The light had no warmth, but before it were the flickering flames of countless lives.

A curtain of light began to descend over the world. Bands of radiance curled around her body, inviting her into the center. The light was so bright that it was painful, and a not-cry escaped from her un-mouth.

She gave herself over to the gentle light that penetrated her body.

The world began to turn pure white, and finally her body dissolved into the paling universe.



When next she awoke, the world was richly colored and vibrant.

Her vision blurred at the vividness of it as her brain turned fever-tinged at the overwhelming amount of visual information.

It was relentless. Terrified, she shuddered and groaned as it was etched upon her.

Her thoughts accelerated; as the nigh-infinite information assailed her, it was categorized, filtering agonizingly toward something with meaning.

The muddy flow of information continued. But as it was categorized, she was restored to where she was meant to be, somehow, without being washed away.

Then the increasingly ordered information reached a certain point. Suddenly, her vision opened. Color became something with meaning, constructing the world around her instantly.

She was on a grassy plain.

Twilight encroached. The sky was reddening with the sunset, and the sun-bathed grass of the plain seemed to flame. A gentle breeze stirred the stalks on the plain; the musical sound of the leaves carried the sense of eternal history.

And off in the distance, the horizon—if anything existed beyond it, she could not be sure.

This was a calm world.

However, the silence was suddenly shattered.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaab!"

A voice—a war cry, a howl—shook the very air as it rushed past her.

She turned her attention toward the sound and saw a pile of ten-odd corpses.

There were beasts and humans, old and young, male and female—there was no commonality, save for the expressions of agony on their faces.

The source of the cry was human. No—he had once been human. His body was that of an adult male, but his eyes were blank, dead, fish-like, and his face had a pale, lifeless pallor. His tongue lolled disgustingly from his open mouth as he continued his bestial utterances. The thing's torso was bent forward like a decrepit old man, yet he still seemed like a beast about to pounce on its prey. His arms did not support his weight, but dangled lazily, a bayoneted gun grasped in his hand, blades blood-red in the setting sun's light.

"Grrrrrrrrrrrr!" he growled, his clouded eyes looking ahead.

There stood a slender boy clad in a vermillion robe, his back to the sun. Looking more closely, he seemed to be a cobbled-together patchwork, easily mistaken for something like papier-mâché. But his body had not crumbled—rather it was in fine form.

The boy held an impressive three-pronged blade in a backhanded grip, fixing the beast before him with a black and deadened gaze.

He was expressionless. Whether or not he truly felt nothing, his face was as blank as a *Nob* mask. His unflinching form was so still, it seemed to become part of the landscape.

But the boy existed. His body was surrounded by a blue-flickering flame. The scent of death carried on the breeze...

She trembled as the boy's black aura assailed her. It was a natural reaction.

Goosebumps rose on her skin and she wanted to flee but somehow could not.

The boy and the man continued to stare at each other.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The man hunched so far forward that he nearly dragged his torso against the ground, before he kicked himself suddenly forward. He closed the distance between himself and the boy in an instant, his weapons pointed at his prey.

There was a sudden muzzle flash from the gun—a thunderous shot rang out as bullet left barrel. The gun kicked back and up, but the bullet was headed straight for the boy's head.

But just as it was about to make impact, the boy finally moved.

With a gesture as though swatting a troublesome fly, he knocked the bullet aside then slowly brought his blade to the ready.

The flickering blue flame tinged the blade, impregnating it with power.

"Argh!"

The man lunged at the boy with his gun, the tip of the bayonet propelled by brute strength toward the boy's neck.

But it never reached its target. The boy's blade easily met and stopped the bayonet, which quivered with the man's effort.

No—it was not clear whether or not there was actual movement. There was a track of blue flame, the path of the blade. That was the only proof.

“Urgk!”

The man gave a strangled cough, his eyes bulging open. He seemed to realize that his body was covered with wounds.

No blood spilled from them. In its place, tongues of blue flame erupted. They covered the man’s body, charring him. His mouth formed a voiceless cry as he fell from his knees to the ground.

Having slaughtered his opponent, the boy remained expressionless. Silence fell, and he looked blankly off into space, ignoring the corpse.

A gust of wind blew across the plain. The next moment, as though he were a dust cloud on the breeze, the boy had disappeared.

She was all that remained.

Unable to move, her memory of the vanished boy remained.

On and on, she gazed...



The clear blue sky was vast. Conspicuous white clouds wandered its expanse, and the brilliant, life-giving sunlight fell upon the verdant grasslands.

The plains seemed to stretch on forever. There seemed to be a leaning tower in the distant horizon. But it was a mirage. No matter

how long she walked toward the tower, the distance to it never changed. It *had been created* as a background, and was not a place that could be reached.

And the grand landscape—though it seemed to stretch into infinity—was not as vast as it looked. Its garden was hemmed in by a wall called “background graphics.”

None of this was real. It was elaborate enough to be mistaken for reality, but the grass, trees, water, sky, land, and the teeming life—none of it was real. Everything in this world was a construction—a fake—save for the players that controlled the characters.

“*The World.*”

That was the name of this universe. Managed by the CyberConnect Corporation—also known as the CC Corporation—*The World* was a massively multiplayer online role-playing game with twelve million players, and with the incredible depth and freedom of its gameplay, the number of users of this monster game was steadily increasing.

Players wore sunglasses-like “Micro Monocle Displays” (also known as “M2Ds”) that were connected to a handheld controller in order to interface with their characters in the game—in other words, they could play from anywhere. The days of being shut up in darkened bedrooms with bulky head-mounted displays were long gone.

Once creating the character that would represent them in *The World*, players acted out that role. One might aim for the adventure of a lifetime, while another might quest for the deepest secrets.

Some players eschewed adventuring entirely, preferring simply to chat, while others formed brigades and traveled to every corner of the game-universe.

Players were free to do what they wanted. Outside of the constraints of system administration, they were completely unrestricted. Most players felt a bit of trepidation upon first encountering this absolute freedom, but they soon realized the possibilities.

Midori was one such player. She was an Edge Punisher, a class that could wield a sword bigger than their own body, capable of cleaving enemies in two with a single stroke. She was *born* for battle.

Yet she hadn't chosen the role deliberately. Character creation required the player to choose a class, and that was simply the class she had happened to choose.

While she may have chosen her class rather carelessly, she attended to her appearance with the utmost care. Her slim body was wrapped in a deeply solemn costume of blue. Its cut was that of a flashy dress, but it was accentuated by a kimono-style sash. It was merely a 3D object with a kimono-texture overlaid on it, but Midori quite liked it. Her shiny black hair was like a wet brushstroke that threw the costume into contrast, and she had green eyes that certainly justified the name "Midori."

Midori gave a short sigh and gazed ahead. Before her stood a Twin Blade, who had short swords in each hand. He charged at Midori without hesitation, sweeping his two swords sideways.

Unconcerned, Midori leaned back just outside of the swords' paths. The two blades missed the tip of her nose by a hair's breadth.

The Twin Blade spit out a wordless malediction. "Raaaagh!" From around them, a cheer rose as if in answer to the cry.

Twenty-odd Player Characters—PCs—had gathered to watch the fight. Thanks to the crowd, the combatants were ringed in, with nowhere to escape.

"Quit dancing around and face me, damn you!" howled the Twin Blade.

Midori had no intention of heeding him, however. If his attack connected, she would take damage; damage beyond a certain point meant death. Of course, death in *The World* was not like death in reality; one could come back as much as one wanted. However, death was bad for Midori's business.

"Midori, thirty seconds left!" cried out a young man from behind her.

"Gotcha!" answered Midori without looking back, returning her attention to the annoying Twin Blade that confronted her.

Midori's class in *The World* was that of an Edge Punisher, but that was merely a construction of the CC Corporation. The role she chose to play was that of a professional victim.

In exchange for allowing PCs to attack her unanswered for sixty seconds, she would receive a small amount of money. This was her job within *The World*, and it was the reason she did not equip a broadsword. She posted ads on the Yomoyama BBS's boards advertising herself as a professional victim, and PCs would seek her

out. Of course, that alone wasn't enough—there was also a reward for any who could defeat her.

"I'll kill you!" threatened the Twin Blade in a low voice. He was not joking. His murderous intent toward Midori was plain as day.

Another cheer rose from the crowd. Some of it was encouragement or heckling directed at Midori, some was general-purpose hubbub; she was at the center of a swirl of emotion.

So, too, was the enraged Twin Blade before her, but he was a Player Killer—a "PK"—whose name was known to the majority of the onlookers. There were many reasons people engaged in PKing; many simply liked to display their own ability to torment the weak. Killing a person in reality would get you arrested, but *The World* allowed anyone to be a homicidal maniac—morality notwithstanding, of course—since the personal details of players were withheld, no matter how wicked their deeds in the game. As it was completely divorced from reality, many PKs used the game as an outlet for stress.

"I'm gonna cut you to pieces!"

Midori's delicate face distorted with a frown. "I think that's enough boasting," she said, sniffing mildly at the Twin Blade. "Idle chatter isn't going to finish me off."

It wasn't mere provocation. She was being as serious as her blustering counterpart. However, there was no way she would lose to a half-assed opponent.

"Fifteen seconds left!"

As if taking that as a signal, the Twin Blade made his move. He closed in, striking with brute force, but Midori, moving freely even in the confined space, managed to dodge at the last second. So long as she got her money, she would put forth any effort.

But she never forgot that she was forcing her opponent to go all out, either. That was how she survived. It was critical.

"Five seconds!"

The eternal minute would soon be over.

The Twin Blade made a downwards swing.

Midori followed the swing's path with her eyes and worked out the best course of action. Her calculation was free of even the slightest inaccuracy. The blade barely missed skimming her nose, burying itself deep in the earth because of the excess force behind the missed blow.

"Time's up!"

The area fell momentarily quiet at the grave pronouncement. The silence lasted but a moment, before she was wrapped in the great shout that arose from the gathered spectators.

Midori looked at the shocked Twin Blade, and sighed softly. They couldn't even be bothered to be serious online, let alone in real life, yet they were happy to use their undeserved pride as a reason to pick on the weak.

There's nothing to be gained from that. Midori relaxed her shoulders and turned her back on the Twin Blade.

"You okay?"

She looked to see a middle-aged Blade Brandier approaching her.

"Of course," Midori answered immediately in reply to his worried question. She returned her rapier-like sword to her waist; she wore a dress that made her seem like an imperial guard in formal attire—but it wasn't just her looks that gave off that impression.

"You saw the job I just did, right, Adamas?"

"Well, yes," came the meek reply, entirely unbecoming of a Blade Brandier. "Adamas" was the root word for "diamond." It was said that some knights would even inscribe the word on their helms for continued luck in their campaigns. It was a fitting name for a Blade Brandier, but his player was little more than an apprentice.

Idle thoughts were running through her mind, when Adamas' face twitched.

She sensed something behind her. It was the black, abyssal flame of an aura. Midori felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

There was no need to turn around.

"You want an extension?" she asked quietly, unmoving.

"You coward!" said Adamas, his tone accusing, but his words were lost in the shocked cries of the onlookers.

"It's not gonna end like this!" A wave of hatred washed over her from behind.

"I'll require an extension fee, then."

"No, that's going too far!"

"That's the kind of place *The World* is. If all you can do is whine about it, you're going to get stripped and tossed aside."

Lately, PKing had become a lot more common, and public order wasn't good, even at the best of times. There were guilds like Moon Tree who advocated its abolition, but so far, the CC Corporation had done nothing.

"If I don't kill you... I... I won't be able to stay here anymore!" howled the Twin Blade from behind her.

"Is there any reason you *should* stay here?"

Midori turned toward this new provocative statement and saw a female Blade Brandier who wasn't shy about showing a lot of her tanned skin. The woman narrowed her eyes. "There really isn't, is there?"

The crowd murmured:

"Is she from Kestrel?"

"Yeah, the PK guild."

"Crap, man."

"He should've bailed!"

Kestrel was the largest guild in *The World*. It was so huge that it was impossible to control, and there were next to no favorable rumors about it. Many notorious PKs were members, among them Bordeaux, whose name even Midori knew. She was a wily opponent.

Bordeaux ran her hand through her short hair then cut down the Twin Blade's body with her twisted, thorn-encrusted sword. Her face was transfixed with ecstasy. "God, I just can't get enough of this feeling!"

"Why, you—that's unfair!" said Adamas.

"Unfair? That's a meaningless term to a PK, y'know. I mean, you're trying to do the same thing to your sweetheart, here."

Bordeaux ran her sword through the Twin Blade.

"Ggh!" He fell to the floor like a broken toy.

"Now, then," said Bordeaux, stepping over the body of the Twin Blade and turning her gaze to Midori. "I've been hearing your name more and more, lately."

"I'm not as famous as you are."

"Oh, you know me? Goodness, how flattering."

The body at Bordeaux's feet disappeared as she spoke in a lazy, disinterested tone. Perhaps the player had logged out.

I wonder if he'll ever come back to The World.

Players who were so absorbed in MMORPGs that it interfered with their personal lives were known as "invalids," but even invalids could have their fervor cooled and wind up retiring. There was no way to know if this particular incident would lead to that, but in any case, he would probably be absent from the game for a while. Trauma from being PKed was not uncommon—though he'd had it coming.

"Shall we play, sweetheart?" asked Bordeaux, bringing her sword to the ready.

"The fee is due up front. For sixty seconds after the signal to start, you may use any attack you like. If you can't defeat me in that amount of time, I keep the money. Understood?"

"And I just turn that fee over to you, sweetheart?"

"Oh, I'll take that," said Adamas, timidly approaching Bordeaux.

"And you are?"

"I'm... I guess I'm something like her manager."

"Her pimp, eh? How nice for you." Bordeaux sneered, turning to face him—then without warning, she ran him through with her sword.

"What?"

Perhaps he couldn't even begin to process the sudden violence. Adamas cried out, an expression of shock on his face. Finally, he fell to the ground.

Midori was just as shocked. "Adamas!" she cried, beginning to run toward him, when Bordeaux blocked her path.

"Now then, shall we start our little game?"

"Not when you ignore the rules and—"

"Humph." Bordeaux snickered. "What rules? The rules you just invented? I'm not bound by those."

Midori had no intention of conceding the point, but she could understand what Bordeaux was saying—if she left her own feelings out of it, that was.

"Hey, all of you!" Bordeaux raised her voice. "You're all part of this game, right? What, because it's a duel? Ridiculous. We're not bound by real-world constraints here, so you'll make them up? It's pathetic."

Bordeaux shrugged her shoulders then swept her sword sideways. Midori sidestepped then readied herself.

"You've gotten off without getting hit thanks to those rules. They're awfully convenient for you." Bordeaux took a step toward

Midori, closing the distance between them. "You all want to see this, too, don't you? This pretty girl getting cut to pieces."

Instigated by Bordeaux, the crowd's mood was beginning to turn ugly.

She hadn't done anything to earn their ire, but there were many players who used professional victims as an outlet for their more destructive impulses. A little instigation, and they'd turn violent.

One by one, the onlookers turned PK. Their hands went to a wide variety of weapons, and ill intent sunk into their minds.

"Now this is getting fun," said Bordeaux, her mood returning.

"This is your idea of fun?" Midori looked around her, considering whether it was time to draw her broadsword.

I'm just as bound by the professional victim rules as they are.

Circumstances were circumstances. She would hardly be flamed for scrapping the rules now—certainly there wasn't anyone here who was keeping them, anymore.

In that case... Midori hesitated. What to do?

The scores of now-PKs surrounded Midori, their weapons in hand, incited by Bordeaux. And that circle was getting smaller.

There was no way to predict how this was going to turn out. One thing was certain—against this many people, she would be overcome and turned into a plaything for their amusement.

I won't let it end, not like this.

Midori tried to encourage herself.

Life and death...

Standing in the rift between the two, her heart pounded, hot blood rushing through her body.

There's still a chance to work this out.

Despite the dire conditions, Midori realized that there was a desperately rare opportunity here. Her character dying wasn't such a huge problem. On the contrary, it was the process that led to that death that was important.

Ever so naturally, Midori smiled.

Bordeaux regarded the smile dubiously. "What the hell are you giggling at?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking how interesting this could be."

"Huh? Interesting? This? Ugh, gross. You freak—have you lost it?"

"I may have, yes."

Then, just as Midori's widening smile reached its peak, an entire section of the group of new PKs suddenly collapsed. There was a boom—and they fell like so many dominoes.

"Well, well, this is quite a party. Can I play?"

A cold voice flowed through the air, and the next moment, another group of PKs went flying.

"He's... The Terror of Death!" one of the PKs managed to call out.

The strange boy known as the Terror of Death possessed overwhelming power to match his dire nickname. With his two huge scythe-like blades, he could attack constantly and with such speed that his opponent never had a chance to counter. The raw numbers

put him at an overwhelming disadvantage, but his psychological and physical strengths more than made up for that.

Haseo, the "Terror of Death," eh?

Midori knew the name. He was an Adept Rogue and a famous PKK—Player Killer-Killer—who had slaughtered more than one hundred PKs. PKs feared him, and his name had penetrated even the general player base.

He's just as strong as I've heard.

The battleground was plunged into confusion by this unexpected arrival. Haseo cut down the fleeing PKs without hesitation, piling up a mountain of bodies in a shockingly small amount of time.

"Damn. And things were just getting started, too." Even Bordeaux knew she held no advantage against Haseo. She grumbled as she teleported away.

Midori ignored Bordeaux's departure and used a resurrect potion on Adamas. The item's effect was immediate.

"That was a disaster," said Midori to Adamas as he was dragged out of death's abyss.

"Ugh, what a nightmare! And we didn't do anything wrong."

"You're too easygoing, Adamas."

"You think so?"

"I do."

Their surroundings were still chaotic. Letting their guard down even a little bit here was a good way to get sent right back to Hades.

"Still, he's incredible. I can see why the PKs are so scared of him. Yeah."

And there was the object of Adamas' envy, standing there like a god of war, the one who wielded his formidable power to hunt PKs—Haseo.

Clad entirely in majestic black armor, if it were not for his exposed head, he'd be easily mistaken for some new type of monster. Everything about him seemed dangerous. But worse than that was the intense aura of power that he seemed to radiate. Let down one's guard for a moment, and the battle would be decided without so much as a sword drawn.

"But what did he come here to do?"

"Maybe he saw the post on the boards."

"No way. Are you saying he'd use a professional victim?"

"It's possible, isn't it?"

Haseo ran a hand through his silver-grey hair as he continued to fight, his movements elegant, almost dancelike. Half of the PKs were already gone; the only ones left were the ones reckless enough to try to make names for themselves. Those who knew their own strength were long gone, having no desire to fight a pointless battle.

He's certainly got uncommon strength.

The current circumstances proved it.

But, that's all...

There were PCs stronger even than Haseo. Reaching his level was not impossible. This was a game, after all—the more time spent

playing, the stronger your character could be. Haseo's strength was not beyond Midori's imagination; though incredible, it was within the realm of the possible.

True terror lies elsewhere.

Simply picturing the figure made a thrill run down her spine. It inspired fright in all who saw it—an instinctual dread that bound both mind and body. The mind would seize; the body would be frozen.

After dispatching the last PK, Haseo turned to Midori. Violence still radiated off his body like heat, but it was not directed at her. He did not use his power indiscriminately.

"Aw crap, he's looking at us."

His Broad Legged—a great broadsword shaped like a centipede—in hand, Haseo was slowly but clearly approaching them; Adamas was on the verge of panic. It was an understandable reaction. Haseo was the Terror of Death, feared even by PKs. And this was no mere rumor—that power had been displayed before their very eyes just moments ago. Adamas wasn't the only person who would give in to fear.

"Oh no, he's gonna kill me again," Adamas whined.

"Again? Has he killed you before?"

"Hey, dying's dying. Doesn't matter who kills you. We gotta warp out of here!"

"It's all right. I don't think he's going to kill us."

"You don't think? Do you have any reason not to think so?"

"Sure, plenty."

Perhaps given some hope by Midori's words, Adamas' face seemed to brighten.

"Reasons like... a woman's intuition," Midori finished

"What? That's not..."

While Adamas cowered and whimpered, Midori turned to face Haseo with a rueful smile. He was steadily approaching. The Broad Legged that he'd been holding was already gone.

"Welcome, Haseo, the Terror of Death." Midori grasped her skirt and performed a curtsy. "Well? Do you want to play?" She spoke to him in a clear, cold voice.

He did not answer and simply looked at Midori as though evaluating her.

"Doesn't seem like you came for fun," Midori said boldly, despite her nervousness. Haseo's blood-red eyes were transfixed by her blue ones.

The air between them was tense. Haseo slowly opened his mouth. "Do you know Tri-Edge?"

Tri-Edge was the name of a legendary PK, whose body was said to be covered in azure flame. His true identity was a mystery. His goal was unknown. Information on him was limited, and his very existence was not entirely certain. That was Tri-Edge.

It was said that if you were killed by him, you could never return to the game—but no one could prove this. The idea that he was nothing more than a rumor had some power, and at the moment, he was only one of many ghost stories told in *The World*.

Midori was taken aback. She hadn't expected Tri-Edge's name to come from Haseo's mouth.

"Do you know Tri-Edge?" Haseo repeated the question, his face serious.

"You don't seem to be joking."

"I'm not." Haseo's expression was unchanged, his tone steady.

"I've seen stuff about Tri-Edge on the boards, but, is it true?" Adamas cut into the conversation, having realized he was unlikely to be killed. He was still being incredibly cautious, though.

"I have no interest in the idle chatter of a BBS," said Haseo, his voice sharp. Adamas gave a little yelp of dismay and backed away. Haseo paid him no mind, and approached Midori.

"Why me?" she asked.

"Because I thought you might have encountered Tri-Edge."

"Me, encounter Tri-Edge?"

"He is no mere PK. He is different."

"I know that," said Midori with a nod.

"I'm not going to find him by wandering aimlessly."

"So you came to me?"

"It's a matter of probabilities," said Haseo.

"You think Tri-Edge is going to appear where I am, so you just show up?" Midori sighed.

"Mmm, d'you think Tri-Edge was somewhere in the audience today?" said Adamas, blithely ignoring the serious mood.

The statement—which was closer to a bad joke—seemed to irritate Haseo, but Adamas took no notice of this. It was just like

Adamas to seriously consider Tri-Edge's whereabouts, and Midori quietly giggled so as not to be noticed.

Tri-Edge, huh?

As soon as she began to picture the figure, her body began to tremble and her mind to fissure, as though even touching upon the thought was forbidden.

With an eerie sound, the doors to her memory began to open.

Then came pain, stabbing down from the crown of her head.

Her face twisted in agony, voiceless words formed in her mouth. An image carved upon the deepest recesses of her mind expanded to fill her vision, and soon her entire world was azure flame.

But that was all.

The memory was hazy, vague—the more she tried to remember, the dimmer it became, as if the memory itself were resisting her.

Was that really Tri-Edge?

She could not be sure anymore.

There was simply that overwhelming presence, that all-encompassing blue flame. In the midst of her uncertain memories, those were the only certainties that remained.

"I see." Haseo evidently took her silence as an affirmation. His expression was even more threatening when he said, "Bingo." He crossed his arms and looked into Midori's eyes.

"So Tri-Edge really does exist," said Adamas, looking back and forth between Haseo and Midori.

"It's just a bunch of nonsense," said Midori.

"Oh, really? Just rumors, then?"

"Augh, try *thinking*, Adamas!" Midori sighed, putting her hand to her head.

"Tell me about him. Tell me." Haseo's voice bound her almost as though by physical force.

"What am I supposed to say? Are you going to hunt the legendary PK?"

Haseo did not answer.

"Is it about glory or something?"

Defeating Tri-Edge would assure anyone's place as a legend in *The World*—just like the ambition-obsessed PKs who had tried to kill Haseo. It didn't seem likely that that was his aim, though.

"I guess you have your reasons."

Haseo didn't seem like the type to be swayed by transient emotions. He appeared to be rooted by a burning passion that existed deep within him. His role as a PKK was no mere performance. The thought struck Midori as terrifying.

What's even real to him?

He might not know himself, anymore.

Many players became so absorbed in *The World* that the line between the game world and the real world was blurred. The game was meant to be a compelling experience, so it was natural that some people got addicted.

But he's...

It smelled of danger.

"Adamas, I'm sorry, but could you head back first?"

"Huh?" Adamas' expression was puzzled at the sudden request.

"What about you, Midori?"

"I've got a date with this guy." Midori patted Adamas lightly on the shoulder and gave him a wink.

"But—"

"I'll be fine," said Midori. "He's not gonna eat me."

Haseo was silent.

"So, that's the plan. See you later, okay?" said Midori.

Neither agreeing nor disagreeing, Adamas reluctantly teleported out. He would try to protect her in his own way. Midori would make it up to him later, but right now she needed to talk with Haseo.

Haseo spoke first. "Do you know Tri-Edge?"

"And if I do?"

"Where is he?"

"Goodness, I wonder," answered Midori curtly. "Even if I knew, I have no obligation to tell you," she said, walking unconcernedly around Haseo. "Tri-Edge means something special to you—but he also is something special to me."

"Your meaning?"

"I mean that information isn't so cheap that I'm just going to tell you."

"So you want money?"

"Hardly," said Midori, shaking her head slightly. "Value is subjective. There plenty of things that can't be bought for mere money."

Haseo was silent, as if thinking. But that lasted only a moment.
"Yes, it's as you say."

"You give up?"

"Never," said Haseo with force.

Then, from behind him, a yellow glow began to arise.

"To me, Tri-Edge is—" he began.

The glow started to dissipate, leaving behind his Broad Legged. Without looking behind him, he reached back for the weapon that was now affixed to his back.

"It's also not something so cheap as to be bought with force," said Midori.

"No." Haseo grasped the Broad Legged and assumed a ready stance. "I am who I am because of my strength."

"By which you mean...?"

"I mean just talking isn't very cool." Haseo grinned. "Sixty seconds, was it?"

"You mean for me, as a professional victim?"

"How much?"

"If you'll become a regular, I'll make the first one on the house."

Haseo smiled unpleasantly at Midori's remark. "The meaning of 'The Terror of Death'—it's why I took up the sword."

A killing aura radiated from Haseo's body. Emanating from his center, its pressure filled the area. His burning passion pulsed outward, skimming the surface of Midori's skin. There was no doubt that he was serious.

I wonder if sending Adamas back was such a good idea.

She pictured Adamas' disapproving face and laughed for an instant before being pulled back into reality.

Haseo's aura was reaching a critical point. His silver hair whipped around wildly, and the Broad Legged sword in his hand seemed to howl.

An instinctual fear caused Midori to take two steps back.

Haseo was the first to move. His great sword flickered, but before the light became blinding, he lunged at Midori, point-first.

He's fast!

It was Midori's habit to calculate paper-thin margins of error for her evasion. She would learn her opponent's limit and go just past it. It made for a good show, but there was no room for that now.

Controlling her character with incredible reflexes, Midori escaped the path of the blade and immediately resumed her stance, simultaneously taking in as much visual information as she could. Terrain, trees, buildings—she had to make them all her allies, somehow finding a way to survive this.

What am I gonna do?

It was her terrible luck that they were in a field. She couldn't see anything nearby that was at all useful. Midori clicked her tongue in irritation then looked straight ahead with her blue eyes. Haseo's eyes were like those of a hunter stalking its prey as he fixed Midori's delicate form in his gaze.

There was no time to evaluate the situation. Haseo had no hesitation. He unleashed the passion within himself, gave it a home in his sword, and attacked with an unbelievable rush of power.

All right, Midori.

There was a huge difference between fighting a PC and fighting a monster in *The World*. Physical and mental condition on a particular day got combined with any number of other factors and complexities, and there were many players that were unable to fight at what their true strength should be. On the other hand, some got lucky and were able to use their fullest potential to defeat a stronger opponent. As long as the players were human, there was no such thing as perfection.

I'll show him—I'll show him strength isn't everything.

Willpower was another important factor. With it, one could appear equal to one's opponent—or even greater.

But appearances alone would not win a battle. Midori was fully aware of that. This was a game, and things like level and equipment were critical.

Each of her senses had been sharpened to its limit, sublimated to a fine edge. Her five senses had become one with the world. Her body was tinged with fever, as though the very cells themselves were warming. Her breath was fast, her heart pounding.

He might be like me.

Suddenly the thought occurred to her.

He expresses himself by dealing out death—I do the same by coming close to death. And then Tri-Edge...

"Uooooooooah!" With a great battle cry, Haseo charged.

Why do I need to meet Tri-Edge?

The weapon buzzed like a chainsaw as it whipped past Midori's ear, hungry for her life. If it made contact, it would obviously cleave

muscle, crush bone, take life, and leave behind a hunk of dead meat. Of course, in reality, all that would happen would be her life gauge dropping to zero and her character model falling down, but the weapon gave off a deadly impression nonetheless.

Why am I seeking Tri-Edge? Midori asked herself as she watched the deadly blade come toward her.

The giant sword was like a thunderbolt from the sky as it came down.

Everything stopped.

"Have you ever fought an unarmed opponent?"

Midori sat in the shade of a tree, looking over to Haseo, who stood next to her. He was leaning against the tree, his arms crossed and his gaze distant. There was no murderous aura.

"I imagine you'll be the first and the last," he said.

In the end, Midori had been unable to avoid Haseo's attack. The superbly timed strike had grazed her upper arm.

It had only taken her life gauge down a bit, but it had been enough. Haseo had not pressed the fight, and Midori had avoided bringing her own broadsword to the ready.

"Have you ever met Tri-Edge?" Midori asked.

"No."

"Ah."

"What is he like?" asked Haseo, his voice low as he glared ahead.

"To be honest, I don't really know."

She had no proof that she had actually encountered him, and it was even possible that she had fabricated the entire memory.

.hack//Cell

But that aura. That was no ordinary PC.

Midori pondered. "The legendary azure flame-covered PK... PCs killed by him can never return to the game," said Midori, lost in thought. "I don't know why you want to find him," she said, "but if there's a possibility, I need to learn something about him."

"Learn something?" Midori's words seemed to finally spark some interest in Haseo. He looked down to her.

"Just like you're chasing him, I'm chasing him, too. Our reasons are different, though." Midori hugged her knees and returned Haseo's gaze. "I feel like he'll lead me to an answer at the end of this."

"What are you seeking from him?"

"What am seeking, huh?" Midori did not answer Haseo's question; she simply looked ahead. There was a party out there that had to be beginners, running this way and that as they battled monsters.

"I wonder what would happen if I died?" murmured Midori to no one in particular.

"Huh?"

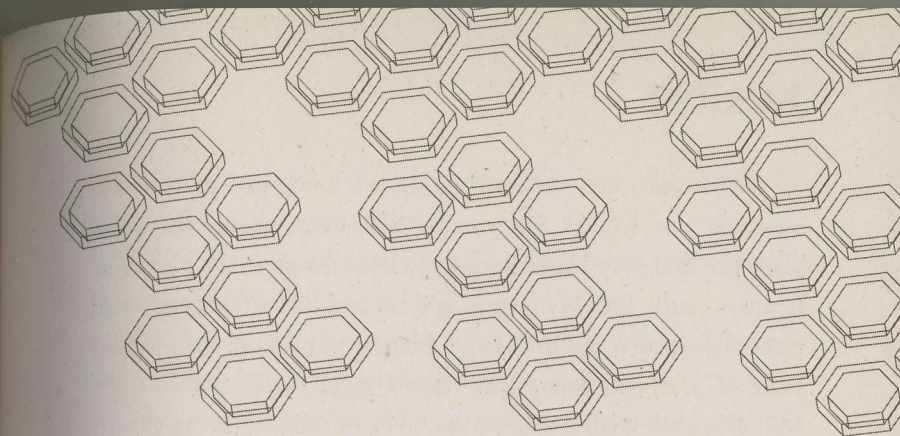
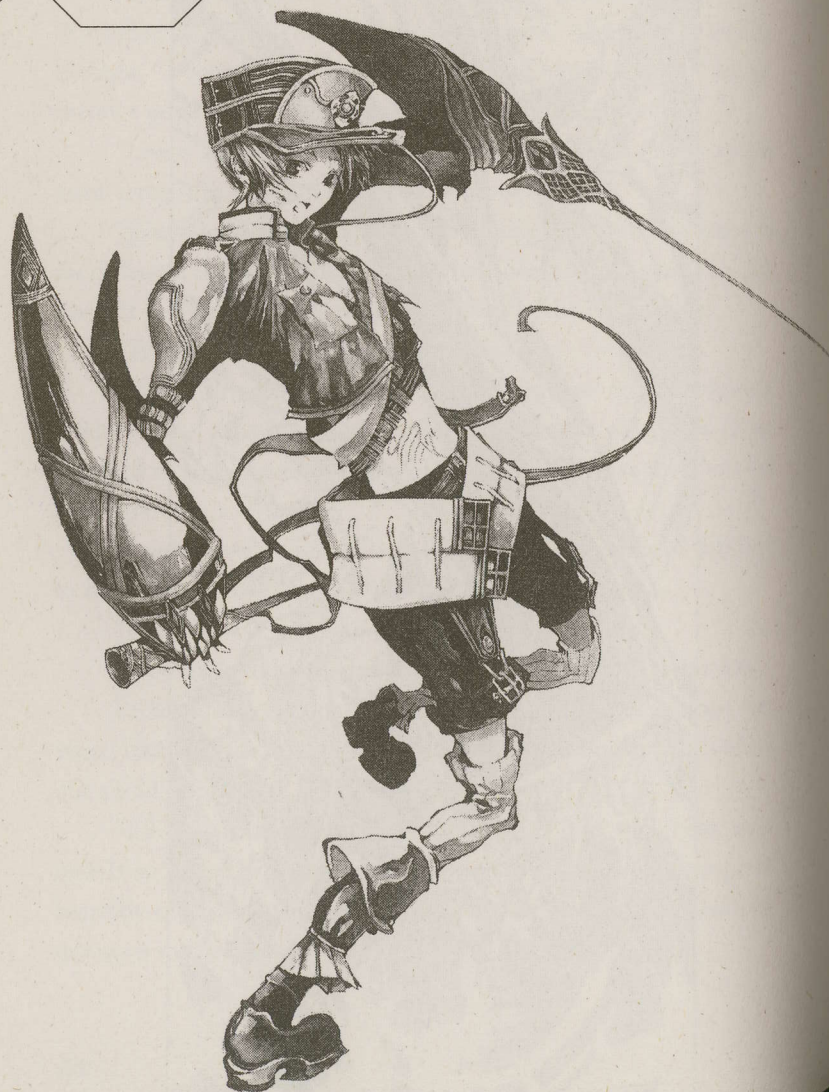
"Nothing." Midori smiled to herself then slowly got to her feet.

Perhaps from the extended stress, she felt mildly dizzy, and her vision blurred and darkened. Midori rubbed her temples and looked out ahead once more.

"I'll understand when I meet Tri-Edge. I'm sure," she said quietly to herself with something like certainty, before shouting her heartfelt encouragement to the newbies who were being chased by monsters in the field.



VOL. 2



VOL. 2

It was a moment of silence that visited the city—but in the next moment, it was gone, swallowed up by the flood that is the hustle and bustle of the urban landscape.

The traffic signal changed from red to green, and people immediately started walking as though they were racecars. Their expressions were tight, severe, like they were somehow cornered. They surged ever forward, as if they were ordered to do so, each trying to get just a little bit further than the others.

The crowd spilled out of the intersection-turned-racetrack. There were people of all ages, sexes, and occupations in the throng, but wage slaves heading back from a hard day's work outnumbered the rest. Of them, the majority were not bound for home, but rather the bars and pubs where they would do their best to enjoy their precious after-work hours.

The next most numerous group was comprised of students, including one Midori Shimomura. She strode along, her shiny black hair and navy blue school uniform making her the picture of Japanese youth. She was surprisingly tall and had a face that would make anyone turn and look twice. Her figure gave off the ineffable sense of a refined young lady from a good family, but in truth, Midori's family could hardly be said to be wealthy. It was her parent's strict discipline and the fact that she'd joined the school's *kendo* club that gave her such a gallant bearing.

"Don't you think there are, like, a lot, lately?"

A single girl's voice cut strangely through the din. Her voice was high, like feedback, and the girl herself, Kaho Izumi, wore the same uniform as Midori, along with a guileless smile. Midori had known her for years. Kaho was the only person Midori considered a true friend. She was a head shorter than Midori, and with her youthful face, she could still easily pass for a middle-schooler. But then her psychological age was about what one would expect, and her tongue was quite skillful, even for a girl.

"If you were a boy..."

"I mean, c'mon, 'childhood friends' are totally supposed to be the opposite sex, right?"

"So basically what I'm saying is that since I've always expected a romance based on a childhood friendship, it makes me want to undo your very existence."

Kaho always said this sort of stuff. She was shamelessly sharp-tongued.

Of course, it was a two-way street. Midori was also starting to be interested in the opposite sex.

"Not even bugs will come near me as long as I hang around you."

"Oh, how awful for you."

"What are you going to do if I wind up an old maid, hmm?"

Midori would lightly reply, rolling her eyes skyward.

But once their verbal sparring was over, they would generally kiss and makeup—generally.

Midori suddenly noticed that Kaho's eyes were following the people around them—or more accurately, the Micro-Monocle Displays (M2Ds) they wore on their heads. They looked like sunglasses, so depending on the time, place, or outfit, they could seem rather out of place, but since M2Ds themselves were so ubiquitous, not many people tended to notice. When she heard that some diehards would customize their M2Ds to fit various occasions, even Midori's mouth had dropped open.

"You have one yourself, Kaho. It's not that rare," said Midori.

"No, no, that's not what I'm looking at." Kaho stopped, glancing at Midori with wide eyes. "You don't have an M2D, even in this day and age. I was thinking of making you tell me why."

"Plenty of people don't use them, you know."

"Not many," said Kaho.

"Well, I seem to get along fine. I just don't feel the need, is all."

Kaho sighed with exaggerated pathos at Midori's nonchalance.

"You're gonna get ostracized."

"Goodness. Such big words you use."

"Not as many as you," said Kaho.

Midori had to laugh at her slumping shoulders. "Anyway, are they really such a good thing?" She suddenly realized that they were talking in the middle of the intersection, and she began to walk, guiding Kaho. They reached the other side just as the traffic signal began to flash, making their way toward the buildings lined up before them like stalks of bamboo.

"Well, pros and cons aside, it's still weird that you don't have one. No matter how much I beg, you don't so much as look back!"

"But I'm fine without one. So what's weird?"

"C'mon, don't be like that." Kaho grinned and gave Midori a light pat on the back, almost like a maple leaf landing on her shoulder. It wasn't clear what her smile was meant to convey, but probably something like "You'll never know unless you try." She often suggested that Midori had this kind of pickiness, but that wasn't the issue.

It's just... A vague unease grew in Midori's mind. It was a large part of why she avoided such a purchase.

A computer terminal no larger than a cell phone would certainly be convenient. Even Midori recognized that. Yet in a world where such things were commonplace, her reluctance went beyond queer and well into aberrant.

In the city, on the train, in the coffee shops—people used their M2Ds everywhere, each absorbed in their own world. They could access huge amounts of information in real time and communicate quickly and easily, but the tradeoff was a weakening of interpersonal

relationships. More and more people were abandoning the real word for the 'net.

Technological development was wonderful, but the abandonment of culture was a problem.

If I say this out loud, she's definitely gonna call me a goodie-two-shoes.

Putting her tangled thoughts in order, Midori returned her attention to where she was actually walking. A huge display attached to one of the buildings seemed to jump into her field of vision.

An array of countless jewel-like lights resolved themselves into a shape—it was a promotion video for the M2Ds that Midori had been thinking about. A famous idol was pimping the newest line with all of her charm.

A lot of effort had apparently been spent on their design, and the frames were admittedly very cool.

Maybe they finally realized people are gonna look at them.

Nonetheless, Midori did not want to imagine a world where M2Ds were ubiquitous.

All that aside, she found herself nonplussed by the dazzling, flickering display. Looking at it too long made her dizzy, and she began to feel genuinely unwell.

"Is Midori finally finding herself interested?" said Kaho.

She'd been staring at the display for long enough that Kaho, sly grin on her face, began to elbow her in the ribs. Midori smiled vaguely and gave Kaho a jab with her own elbow, then looked back to the display.

Just as she thought it was fading out, it came back to life, showing a city Midori had never seen before. There was a huge temple-like building in the center, and colored beams of light stabbed up, laser-like, into the sky. It looked like Las Vegas, except for the otherworldly architecture.

Midori cocked her head at the strange image; perhaps it was a movie trailer or something.

"Oh, that's the Root Town of the Omega Server. Lumina Cloth." Kaho rattled off a bunch of terms that may as well have been gibberish to Midori.

"The Omega what? Root Town who? What are you talking about?" Midori furrowed her brow.

"The Root Town of Omega Server, Lumina Cloth. It's a huge city in *The World*."

"Oh, that's that video game."

"Video game? What year do you think this is, anyway?" Kaho held her head in her hands and sighed, then mumbled "Guess I shouldn't be surprised," and gave a rueful grin. "That picture really doesn't explain how cool it is," Kaho continued. "You should come along with me some time and check it out. There's all kinds of places I wanna show you."

Kaho's heart had already flown off to this "Lumina Cloth" place as she gazed at the display like an innocent girl in love.

"I going to need some hardware to tag along with you, though," groaned Midori, thinking of the balance in her savings account. She'd been able to put away about three thousand dollars

between part-time jobs and her allowance. Considering that the full set wouldn't quite come to one thousand dollars, it seemed like she'd get her money's worth, despite the large expenditure.

She was weighing the pros and cons, when, with no preamble, her vision blurred and swam. The world around her lost its coherency and crumbled like a shattering clay pot. *I don't feel so good.*

Her body reacted even before her mind had the chance to form something like doubt.

Perhaps it was an inner ear problem. Her sense of equilibrium gone, the horizon tilted crazily—it was nothing as simple as dizziness. It was a despairing sensation, as if someone were actually churning up the insides of her brain. Just as she felt her mind being violated, the sensation raced through her entire body.

"Ah!" A cry no louder than a popping soap bubble escaped her lips.

Her feet left the ground. Her body rose into the air. Consciousness receded dramatically into the distance, and the world sank into blackness.

She heard Kaho crying out, distantly—ever so distantly.



Having gated out of the grassy plain, Midori found herself in the Root Town of Delta Server—the ancient city of Mac Anu.

It was the oldest city in *The World*, and the sun was just beginning to set, plunging it into twilight. The medieval architecture

of the old city had a nostalgic feel to it, a sadness that seemed to pluck at heartstrings.

Feeling hurried, she quickened her steps.

She wondered if it was some childhood memory that put her in this state, like a child hurrying along the road home.

Childhood, eh? Midori grinned ruefully to herself, slowly reeling in the memory. Indistinct as the misty twilight, it would not come back to her immediately. *Gezz!*

She sighed and ran a comb through the black fall of hair of which she was so proud, then she looked to the flickering, burning light of the sunset.

It's so easy to forget this is all a game.

Midori turned her gaze to the streets of Mac Anu. It was a city built on steam-powered technology, with columns of water vapor rising from the tops of buildings here and there—the revival of a steampunk world.

Midori looked up to the towering Chaos Gate dome. Within the dome was a gate that allowed travel to any area or server in *The World*. Since going adventuring required a trip through the Chaos Gate, there was a constant stream of PCs coming in and out of the building.

Midori turned her back to the Chaos Gate dome and strolled unhurriedly along the street. There was a lot of traffic. About half of the PCs were newbies, characters who had just taken their first step into *The World*—she could tell that much just by looking at their equipment and activity. On the other hand, there were many veteran

PCs who played the role of a newbie, so it was hard to be sure just based on appearance.

As she was walking toward the plaza in the center of Mac Anu, she felt dizzy, and her body began to pitch forward. Before she toppled over entirely, she unsheathed her broadsword and planted it in the ground, using it as a staff to support herself.

Still pretty shaky, I guess.

Her battle with Haseo was affecting her more than she had anticipated. The physical exertion was obvious, but there was also a psychological stress and those effects were anybody's guess.

Seems "the Terror of Death" isn't just a showy nickname.

Midori giggled to herself; the passing PCs looked at her strangely.

I better do something before I get reported.

She shook her head as if to banish the idle thoughts then drew herself back upright—but her body's condition was worse than she'd anticipated.

A shock of pain ran through her chest, more psychological than physical.

She clasped her hand to her chest and took a deep breath.

Ba-bump.

A single powerful heartbeat shuddered through Midori's slender frame.

"What?" Midori opened her eyes wide. "What is this?"

A black feeling welled up from the depths of her mind. Like a widening ripple, it expanded throughout her body.

Ba-bump, ba-bump.

She grabbed her chest, squeezing down in an effort to suppress the abnormal feeling that pulsed out from her heart.

I don't feel good.

A mysterious nausea took hold of her body. It felt as though some unknowable *thing* was robbing her of volition.

When she came to, Midori grimaced harshly, her mouth contorting and her pupils dilating.

"Hey—are you all right?"

"You don't look so good!"

Midori started at the worried voices and sluggishly raised her head. There before her was a male Blade Brandier clad in light green, along with a stout Shadow Warlock from the beast tribe, who was also male. Both gave off an aura of genuine concern.

"Maybe her terminal's busted."

The Blade Brandier leaned over and peered at Midori.

"Maybe she's, like, a n00b?"

The Shadow Warlock, who looked like a poorly-made snowman, trotted in circles around Midori. Midori couldn't help but laugh at the comical figure she cut.

"Look, she laughed! She's laughing!"

The Blade Brandier sighed at his clapping companion's antics. "I don't think it's so much her laughing as it is you being laughed at, Gaspard."

"What? So now I've become a laughingstock, huh? What'll I ever do, Silabus?"

"How the heck should I know?" said Silabus with a pained grin, regarding Gaspard with an exasperated slouch.

"I guess I'm just a clown, anyway. How much d'you reckon a laugh costs?"

"I dunno; it's hard to balance on a ball when you're practically a ball yourself."

"Awww!" Gaspard stomped his feet, his expression a complicated mixture of irritation and sadness.

"Are you guys comedians or something?" asked Midori, composing herself after stifling a laugh. Whatever had afflicted her was gone, she realized.

"Well, *I'm* not, anyway."

"I'm not either!"

"Well, you make a good team," said Midori, putting a hand to her mouth and smiling brilliantly.

"Ah, introductions. I'm—"

"Silabus—and this little one is Gaspard. Right?" Midori asked, her smooth statement beating Silabus to the punch. Silabus and Gaspard looked at her, their faces stunned into non-expression.

"Well, aren't you going to ask my name?" Midori pouted, but her feigned indignation collapsed upon seeing the comedic duo's frantic hand motions. "I was just kidding around!" she said.

"Oh, you were joking? Ha ha!" said Gaspar, literally doubling over in laughter.

"Well, it's late, but—what's your name?"

"Midori. It means green—just like the green in my eyes, see?" Midori pointed to her irises.

"Whoa, now that's something that'll really catch your eye."

"I could say that about someone in your shape and it wouldn't even be a joke," quipped Midori.

"Dong, dong, dong!" Gaspard's face was the picture of dejection; he looked like he was at someone's funeral, his shoulders slumping.

"Kidding! Still kidding!" Midori winked and patted his head as if she were mollifying an upset child.

"Waaah! She tricked me!"

Silabus regarded Gaspard out of the corner of his eye, his fists raised indignantly into the air as he turned toward Midori. "Incidentally, Midori, we were about to head out. Want to party up?"

"Huh? Me?!" Midori stared blankly upon hearing the proposal.

"Yeah, we found a pretty promising spot."

"It's a Lost Ground, one of the places that's existed ever since Fragment, doncha know."

"Fragment was the first form of the game that turned into *The World*. But I guess you already know that, huh?" Silabus grinned and scratched his head.

Now that I think of it, I haven't been in a party for a long time.

She'd been mixing it up with PKs for a long time. Even Midori herself didn't really understand what it was she was in such a hurry to accomplish.

"I'm sorry. You must be keeping your friends waiting. I can't, today," Midori said, bowing deeply.

"Don't sweat it; it was on short notice and all. Sorry we asked out of nowhere like that."

"Right, right! And I'm sure we'll have time to adventure again, doncha know."

"Gaspard's right," said Silabus, his tone breezy and pleasant. Next to him, Gaspard nodded, the perfect yes-man.

"We'll invite you again, okay? Make sure to come out with us!"

"Right, so—we're off, but let's at least exchange member addresses, okay?"

"Sure." Midori nodded and transmitted her member address to Silabus and Gaspard, who did the same for her.

Member addresses were unique identifiers used to communicate in *The World*. They were extremely handy for checking the status of players—you could set yourself "busy" for those times when you were online but occupied, and you could even appear to be offline.

"All right, see you!" said Silabus.

"Bye-bye!"

"Sure, see ya!" replied Midori.

She looked back several times, each time catching sight of their cheerfully waving forms; it filled Midori with an indescribable feeling of warmth—a feeling that was hard to come by here in *The World*.

Everyone in this game was in a hurry to live. They bared their emotions, whittled away their lives, and scattered. Coming this close

to life and death was impossible in the real world, but for players in *The World*, killing and even dying were within the realm of their experience.

It was freedom beyond anything possible in the real world—the freedom to kill another. The freedom to take another's life, the freedom to lose one's own. It was only natural that some, released from the ties called "freedom" that bound them in reality, would become PKs upon entering *The World*.

That's why I search. I search for the one who has seen more death than any other.

Tri-Edge, the one who used his absolute power to slaughter PCs, inspired hope, rather than despair, in Midori.

The reason for my existence—where I came from, and where I am going...

Suddenly the thought occurred to Midori. *Perhaps I hope Tri-Edge will kill me.*

If she said it out loud, she knew Adamas would lose it completely. She couldn't help but smile when she imagined his wide-eyed face. *He worries about me.*

She expected that Adamas was even now waiting for her return, staring into the fountain in the central plaza of Mac Anu. Her stride quickened.

Several months had passed since she had teamed up with Adamas. Whatever it was that served as the trigger for their first encounter, it was beyond the edges of her memory, although she had an impression of aspiring to be like some particularly strong person and consciously acting like they acted.

The central plaza was overflowing with adventurers. The whole gamut was there, from hearty characters about to head out, to ragged, beaten ones returning from battle. And it wasn't just adventurers—many had gathered to chat, others doggedly peddled their wares, each person was spending their time exactly how they wished.

Midori put her hands on her hips and surveyed the plaza. Eventually, her gaze landed on the fountain situated in the center of the area. A throng of PCs was gathered around it, waiting to meet their comrades. They seemed like a single huge organism, drifting about the area with a strange feverishness.

Midori looked closely into the crowd but saw no trace of the individual she was looking for—Adamas. Thinking to check his member address, she saw that he was set as busy. He would probably return soon.

Just as she turned to approach the fountain, she caught sight of a certain familiar Blade Brandier out of the corner of her eye.

"Adamas?" she murmured, turning to look, whereupon she saw a group of PCs entering the Chaos Gate, including—evidently—Adamas.

She had only seen him for a brief instant, but there was no mistaking him. Her long association with him made her all the more sure.

But that was not the important detail. Midori had recognized one of the PCs that had taken in Adamas.

Bordeaux?!

They emerged from the Chaos Gate into an area that Adamas had never seen before—the Arche Koeln Waterfall.

It was one of the Lost Grounds scattered around *The World*. They were unused areas of the server that had been constructed during the Fragment era. Lost Grounds had been discovered accidentally and had not been officially sanctioned by the CC Corporation. As they continued to pop up, though, the story was that the CC Corporation had been forced to acknowledge them.

Arche Koeln was one of the most recently discovered Lost Grounds, and it was a special place for people in-the-know.

It was a huge plain with a giant waterfall. Behind that overwhelming cascade of water, one can just make out a monument of some kind. It seemed connected to the mystery of the world—if one could reach it, it might trigger an in-game event.

"Hey, check it—he's freakin' out!"

Adamas flinched at the scornful voices that assailed him. His heart pounded and his breath was ragged. Sweat began to soak his clothes as his feeling of unease grew.

Wh-why is this happening to me?!

He tried to regain his composure, but the more aware he was, the more agitated he became. His hands trembled as they gripped the controller, the vibrations rippling through this body.

The next thing he knew, he was surrounded by a large group of PCs. He recognized all of them. Half had been customers of Midori's; the rest were PKs of moderate renown.

That alone would've been enough to make him faint, but the biggest problem was the leader of the group: Bordeaux.

"So, boss, are we gonna kill this n00b, or what?" asked a Twin Blade airily as he glared at Adamas

"Don't be stupid, Negitama. Killing him won't make the name Bordeaux any more famous."

"It's not Negitama; it's Negumaru," said the Twin Blade timidly.

Perhaps they were here on Bordeaux's orders. Beside Negumaru stood a huge-bellied Blade Brandier.

"Bordeaux," he muttered, looking to Bordeaux. It was unclear whether his silent demeanor was an act or not.

"Easy now, Grein. We don't have a full cast of characters yet. The real fun's yet to begin."

Grein nodded silently then hefted his giant sword over his shoulder and rejoined the group of PKs.

What's gonna happen to me? Adamas' confused mind raced, but he could find no solution. He wanted to log-out right then and there and pretend like nothing had ever happened—he wanted it so badly, he thought about smashing his terminal.

But he couldn't do it. The reason was simple: He didn't have the courage.

The number of PKs continued to grow.

"Wh-why are you *doing* this?!" Adamas forced the words out of his dry mouth.

"Isn't it obvious?" Bordeaux snorted and stood in front of Adamas. She pointed her sword right at his nose.

"Urk!"

Bordeaux snickered at his strangled cry. "I said it before, didn't I? Killing the likes of you isn't worth my time. I invited you to this little party because I thought you could help me out."

"Help you out?"

"You remember what happened before, don't you?" Bordeaux sidled up to Adamas. "With the Terror of Death."

"You mean Haseo...?"

"Got it in one. Things were just getting interesting when he showed up and ruined everything. It can't just end like that, right? Don't you agree? Don't you?"

Bordeaux lowered her sword and brought her face very close to Adamas'. The expression on her face was pure evil; he felt like a tiny frog being eyed by a hungry snake.

"So-o-o, I was thinking of taking a little revenge," Bordeaux continued. "Which is why I've brought some friends along."

"Friends... you mean Kestrel!"

"Bingo! Give 'im a round of applause, folks."

"Is this poor sap even any use to us?" Negimaru cut in on the exchange.

"The guy's really friggin' strong—we'd never win in a fair fight."

Bordeaux continued as though she were speaking to an exceptionally dull student: "Which is why we'll play the numbers game. For better or for worse, there are a lot of people out there with a grudge against the Terror of Death. All I had to do was send a few e-mails, and look!" she said, gesturing delightedly at the

assembled PKs. Her head was no doubt already filled with visions of a slaughtered Haseo.

And yet her resentment was unjustified. Bordeaux's reckless violence was to blame, and Haseo had done nothing wrong.

Of course, Adamas lacked the courage to point this out.

"This kid is gonna call out the Terror of Death for us. That bastard got the drop on us last time, but this time, we're gonna take him by surprise!"

"Brilliant, boss!"

Adamas paled as he stood next to the fawning Negimaru. "That's so sneaky! I can't possibly—"

"What's that? You can't possibly?" said Bordeaux, her voice trembling as she stared at a frozen Adamas. "It's not as though I'm telling you to be a coward. That's a PK-patented technique. Right?"

"S-so... I..."

"Just send him an e-mail. That's easy enough, right?" Bordeaux gave a throaty chuckle.

"But..."

"You do understand that I'm not *asking*, right? Do you *get* that?" Her tone was light, but her meaning was deadly serious.

An ominous voice sounded in Adamas' mind. It was no hallucination. It was his own voice, his own mind: *Just nod.*

Bordeaux had him in the palm of her hand. He had no way to resist her, no choice but to obey.

"Go with the flow" was Adamas' way of living. He shut his eyes to anything he didn't want to see, blindly following

those with power. It was easy to live that way, avoiding all difficulties.

It was a seductive path. Adamas nearly succumbed and nodded his agreement, but no—he shook his head. *I hated that stuff. That's why I came here!*

The World existed apart from reality. It was Adamas' dream to be somewhere where he could create a new personality, free from all constraints. And yet before him was a group with the audacity to try to destroy that chance.

I can't let them get away with it!

He had summoned what little courage he had and was about to give it voice when Bordeaux spoke: "If you'll just do as I ask, that's fine. But if you're going to be *difficult* about it, well—we have ways," she said, as if to crush his resolve. She put her hand on his shoulder and continued. "That green-eyed girl—what was her name, again?"

Bordeaux seemed to stifle a laugh, as though something were funny. Adamas paled another shade.

She's talking about Midori, but why?! Adamas shuddered at this unexpected development. A strange shiver worked its way up through his legs.

Whether or not she noticed this, Bordeaux's snarky voice only got louder: "If we don't kill the Terror of Death, I don't think we're gonna be able to contain ourselves. Isn't that right, guys? Am I right? So we'll just have to have that little sweetheart of yours make us feel better."

The shock of Bordeaux's words pounded Adamas' head like an iron hammer. He froze, his thought processes completely undone.

"How nice for you that you've got some options you didn't have before! Make sure to thank Bordeaux, all right?"

It was no joke. Either choice left Adamas with nothing but despair. He would never be able to return to *The World*.

It would be tantamount to negating his very existence.

Real life held nothing but frustration, irritation, sadness, and confusion. It was only after great effort that he'd found a place for himself—*The World*. Leaving it behind was no simple matter.

A vision of Midori danced gaily through Adamas' mind—close enough to touch and yet strangely distant all at once. Despite their months together, he had as yet been unable to close the distance between them.

I still don't know anything about her.

But he had no time to ponder this.

Choosing Midori meant selling out Haseo, and if he took Haseo's side... No matter what he chose, his reputation would be destroyed. Staying Midori's partner would be out of the question.

Bordeaux regarded Adamas, a triumphant grin upon her face. She was enjoying watching him suffer. "So, boy, what's it gonna be?"

Adamas bit his lip as her question sank in. The taste of iron filled his mouth.

He squeezed his eyes shut and hugged himself to stop shaking. He'd hit upon blocking out his own vision as a way to buy a measure of composure, but his ears—mercilessly—still picked up every sound.

The images displayed by the M2D were entirely artificial, but sound was different. Whatever filters were applied to the voices, they always originated with a real, live human—as did the spite.

His flesh crawled. The revulsion made him want to vomit.

Adamas opened his eyes. He gathered his resolve and nodded. "All right."

Two figures watched Adamas fall into Bordeaux hands from afar.

They hid beside a platform, holding their breath, quietly taking in the scene. It was Silabus and Gaspard.

"Wh-wh-what're we gonna do? This is big, Silabus! Really big!"

"Yeah, this could be trouble," Silabus answered, keeping his eyes on the group of PKs. *I wonder if we should report this to the admins.*

But Kestrel's involvement made things difficult. Even supposing they were able to defuse this situation, there was a good possibility it would happen again. Even just reporting it could exacerbate the situation, Silabus worried. They couldn't afford to be careless.

"The two of us alone won't be able to do anything; that said, Canard is just the two of us."

"Maybe if Kuhn were with us, y'know?"

"Yeah. But we can't just rely on him all the time."

Canard was a guild dedicated to helping out newbies. Silabus and Gaspard were the only members, so it was doubtful whether it could even properly be called a guild—but in any case, if they were to start any kind of inter-guild conflict with a group like Kestrel, they'd be destroyed immediately.

After agonizing about it for a while, Silabus turned his attention to a certain member address.



Midori headed from the fountain plaza to the port district. Walking along the wharf, the sound of the waves reached her ears as she gazed out over the sea.

The setting sun's light scattered off the surface of the dark blue sea, which glittered as though it were inlaid with precious stones.

Just as her eyes were adjusting to the light, a blast of steam arose from one of the steamships moored there. Surprised, Midori blinked rapidly.

She sighed in mild exasperation as a rhythmic beeping noise accompanied by a flashing icon signaled the arrival of a mail.

There were only a few individuals who could have sent it—Adamas, perhaps, or a system-related notification from the CC Corp.

Assuming it was from Adamas, Midori opened the message and soon realized she had been wrong. Though she had totally forgotten about it, she had just exchanged addresses with someone else.

She grinned and scratched her head, glancing at the sender field. It was from Silabus. *I wonder if they've got any new jokes to show me.*

Just thinking of the mismatched pair was enough to make Midori smile. But an instant later, she froze.

Without replying to the message, she immediately closed the menu and sprinted for the nearest Chaos Gate.

Particles of light coalesced from nowhere in particular into the shape of a person. Eventually, Midori's form stabilized and solidified. She quietly opened her eyes.

Midori had passed through Mac Anu's Chaos Gate and had been spit out at Arche Koeln Waterfall. She quickly made sure her body was all there then surveyed her surroundings.

She was oblivious to the scenery, either because she was shutting out superfluous information or because her visual function was extremely limited.

Midori took a deep breath to try to calm her pounding heart, to no avail. The unease seemed to have taken over her body. Soon it turned to fear. *Adamas!*

Thanks to Silabus, she had some idea of the circumstances in which Adamas was being held, but she had no idea what the reasoning was. Given Bordeaux and the rest of Kestrel's habits, the harassment wasn't hard to explain.

But why Adamas?

They generally tended to pick on the weak, but she couldn't help wondering why him, of all people. Her face twisted into a bitter expression when she sensed a presence behind her. She whirled defensively.

"That was fast."

"We've been waiting!"

It was Silabus and Gaspard. They each wore uncharacteristically grave expressions, which drove home the seriousness of the situation.

"Where's Adamas?" Midori asked as calmly as she could manage, but her voice was unavoidably high.

"Um, yeah. Things have gotten kind of crazy."

"There are like a whole bunch of PKs! What're we gonna do?!" Gaspard cried.

"By the time we got there, there wasn't anything we could do."

Just as Silabus said, there was nothing Midori could do now. "I can't just leave him there."

This was poor, timid Adamas, after all. He must have been in an utter panic, surrounded by PKs like that. There was probably nothing they could do to save him. But even trying to save him would be of some help to poor Adams.

This is no time for chatter.

She had to hurry forward, even if it meant going through Silabus and Gaspard.

"Well, let's give it a shot. If they spot us it'll be trouble, so we'll leave some distance between us and you. Okay?" Silabus said emphatically. He was probably trying to stop Midori from charging in ahead.

He's a pretty cool customer. The thought occurred to Midori, and she found her nervousness oddly thinned.

Silabus nodded once then started walking along with Gaspard. Midori followed.

Immediately, she noticed the disturbance. Ahead of her, Silabus and Gaspard stopped and pointed.

Amid a giant waterfall that filled her screen from edge to edge was gathered a large group of PCs—dozens, from the looks of it.

They gave off a feverish, bloodthirsty aura as they waited for the arrival of the sacrifice they expected.

In the center of that evil crucible was Adamas. He was looking down, frozen where he stood out of fear or despair. She couldn't see his face.

Next to him was Bordeaux, who laughed shrilly, her chest puffed out proudly.

The situation was grim. Midori and her comrades were vastly outnumbered, and it was far beyond their abilities to do anything. But that wasn't the biggest problem. She wasn't at all afraid to charge into the group and die a noble death. In a very real way, death did not exist in *The World*.

The mind, however, was different. Wounds to one's psyche could fester, untreated, until they ate away at it entirely. And that was something no Harvest Cleric could heal.

Adamas was being used to satisfy Bordeaux's personal grudge. Whatever the reasoning, that was simply a fact. What was he thinking? What decision had he reached? It was a very important detail.

He can't call Haseo.

There was no way he knew Haseo's member address.

So that means...

She didn't want to consider it, but Adamas only had one course of action he could take—there was really only one thing *anyone* could do under such circumstances.

Our friendship won't be broken over something like that! she thought, then she realized the hypocrisy of the statement.

She could look the other way, pretending she hadn't seen anything. But Midori didn't wish to.

"I've just had a thought. We could get Moon Tree to help."

"Hey—that's a good idea!"

Midori listened to the two converse, all the while keeping her eyes on Adamas.

"So your conclusion is..." Midori murmured, her eyes downcast.



Adamas was waiting for time to pass. That was all he could do. He was surrounded by the clamor of battle preparations. Here and there, dangerous-looking PCs equipped their weapons, waiting for the arrival of just one person: Haseo, the Terror of Death.

He was the one PKK they feared above all other PCs. Once anyone had witnessed that overwhelming power, they would never consider rising up against it again. But perhaps thanks to the psychological effect of being in a group, they had conquered their fear of death.

But their plan would come to nothing, Adamas knew, so he kept his mouth shut and waited—waited with all his might.

Bordeaux had offered him two choices: Midori or Haseo.

Either case led to the worst outcome, but there was one other choice that remained. It was the sole light in the darkness of Adamas' despair.

I won't let her dictate terms.

Adamas would not sell Haseo out. He also could not offer up Midori as a sacrifice. *Making someone a victim just to save myself...*

Even if it was just a game, there were some lines he couldn't cross. Even if it was just a *role*. He was naturally careful when he thought about trying to influence someone else. Betraying a friend was beyond the pale, the actions of the worst kind of scum.

The fact was that he had made a mistake. He was holding on, but a black shadow was descending over his mind.

Adamas' body trembled. The pain was limited to what could be conveyed in the game, so it was strange. Escape would be easy. As soon as he teleported away, he could physically disconnect his terminal. But even if he were to escape, the PKs would only find someone else to threaten and torture. He couldn't leave it at that.

"He's awfully late," drawled Bordeaux. "Did you really send that message?" She was obviously becoming irritated.

Her voice put Adamas on edge; he twitched. He was stricken with a sudden urge to flee, but he planted his feet and forced himself to stand firm. This was as nervous as he could get.

He mustered his courage against his battered heart and looked up—only to have his eyes seize upon the figure of a PC off in the distance.

What is she doing here?! Adamas shuddered. *She shouldn't be here, no, she couldn't be here. She must be here to wash her hands of me...*

He finally understood.

This was the outcome he had invited. He regretted it, but it made sense. *If I'd only been stronger, none of this would have happened.*

It wasn't physical strength that Adamas needed. If he'd had the strength of will, he wouldn't have fallen into this situation. Even

if his character were killed, that was all that would happen. There wasn't any need for this fear.

Maybe they're slow to notice.

Adamas smiled nervously. As soon as he realized it, there was no more fear. His trembling had lessened.

"He *is* coming, isn't he?" Bordeaux's voice dripped with anger, but even that couldn't stir Adamas' mind.

"Haseo is not coming," he announced loudly.

"Huh?!" Bordeaux's ragged shout echoed through the crowd of PKs, who all turned their attention to Adamas.

"I said, Haseo is not coming," he said again without hesitation.

"Oh? Don't you think that's a bit far for a joke?"

"It's not a joke."

"I *see*. Well, isn't that interesting?"

Bordeaux drew her thorned blade and pointed it at Adamas. The other PKs, too, crept toward him with their weapons at the ready.

It was like something out of a nightmare. Dozens of pairs of eyes, all with murderous intent, looked directly at him.

He had already ruled out fighting. It would be meaningless—and besides, he already had his weapon ready. It would give him more power than even the rarest item.

Bordeaux sighed quietly and leveled her gaze at Adamas. "Well then, boy." With a cruel smile she held her sword ready. "You should know I'm not going to give you an easy death."

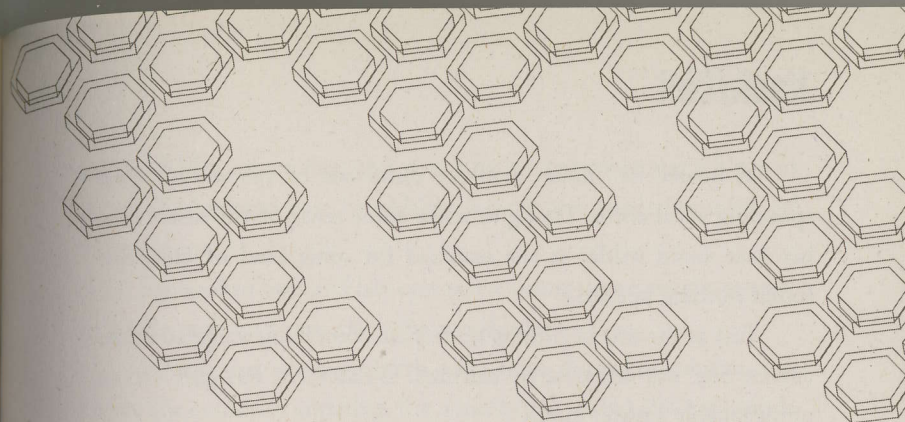
The light caught the edge of her blade.

The next instant, Adamas' severed head flew into the air.

His face was utterly peaceful.



VOL. 3



VOL. 3

Midori drifted between dream and reality. Her consciousness wandered without any destination, like a floating cloud. She had no sense of where she might be headed. She simply drifted, lazily, endlessly.

She had no control over her body. Either she had no physical form, or no way to exert force. Yet her senses were strangely clear—so vivid it felt as though her nerves were totally exposed. She shivered. A chill ran down her spine. It felt like countless insects crawling out of her body; revolted, Midori groaned.

She forced her heavy eyelids open. Her vision was indistinct, as though a film covered her eyes, obscuring the scenery. The world was warped and unsteady.

The scene was unreal, as though it couldn't possibly be from this world, and Midori was desperately confused.

A hoarse half-moan, half-cry came out of her mouth, past spasming vocal cords. Trying to make some sense of the distortion, her gaze swam wildly as she searched for some kind of clue. She found nothing helpful.

Just as she was beginning to despair, something wriggled in the corner. She was immediately alarmed. Whatever it was gave off an unmistakably sinister aura.

Midori was terrified, but felt compelled to watch the thing.

It was a single cell. In a flash, its enthusiastic division filled her vision. The shocking propagation made Midori recoil.

The rapid cellular division seemed now to have a consciousness as it began to assume a shape.

It was a giant hunk of meat. It pulsed, absurdly repulsive. From somewhere within the giant mass of rotting entrails, an evil odor emanated.

Stricken by extreme fear, Midori froze. Her breath came in rapid gasps. Just as the terror reached its peak, her vision began to dim and she heard a voice.

The moment it reached her ears, she abruptly began to regain consciousness. Slowly but ever so surely, she was being pulled up out of the mire of this dream.

A huge amount of information flowed over and through her. Quietly, carefully, Midori opened her eyes. There was no distorted world, no putrid ball of flesh. She saw a pure white ceiling and four white walls. A beam of morning sunlight fell through the window and into the simple hospital room. The room was about one

hundred fifty square feet, and if she hadn't known it was a hospital room, the bed and bare furnishings would have made her think of a cheap hotel.

She looked over and her eyes met a young nurse, maybe twenty, in a pale pink uniform. *Oh, so that was the voice.*

Midori was overcome with a desire to thank the woman, but before she could say anything, the nurse began taking a blood sample from Midori with practiced movements. After explaining the day's scheduled tests, the nurse quickly left the room.

"I wonder who came up with that 'angel in a white uniform' nonsense."

The nurse, who hadn't even managed a professional smile, was certainly no angel.

I guess the angel in a white uniform's a victim of the times, eh?

Midori accepted her own strange reasoning as she slowly pulled herself up to a sitting position. Perhaps because of the strange dream, she did not feel especially rested.

"Looks like today's gonna be another long day." Midori's shoulder slumped as she sighed deeply.



A week had flown by since the misfortune of Midori's sudden hospitalization. Her memory was intact up until the point where she became dizzy and collapsed, but after that, her memories were gone. When she came to, she was in a hospital bed.

Hospital life took on the characteristics of a protracted military campaign. She'd assumed it would only be a few days, but apparently her symptoms were worse than she'd guessed. The results of the tests weren't back yet. At the moment, she had no obvious symptoms and indeed was the picture of health, so all she wanted to do was gather her belongings and check herself out—but her request to do so was flatly denied.

She'd undergone a variety of tests since being hospitalized—thorough tests, too, from head to toe. She felt like a guinea pig and harbored dark suspicions that they were doing more tests just to inflate the medical bills that would ensue.

The medical database probably included more information about Midori than she knew about herself. She felt like everything but her very mind had been laid bare.

Midori prized her modesty. Who was looking at her data and for what purpose? The very thought made her ill. And there was no guarantee that data wouldn't travel, which made her just unspeakably uneasy and fearful.

She walked around the hospital ward in her pajamas, trying to figure out what to do with all the time she had on her hands. Once the tests were done, she was free until lights-out.

Midori had had enough of napping in her room. Her parents or Kaho would often come to visit, but they had work and school, so their presence was limited to the evenings, and to Midori, who preferred to be active, her situation was now not far from torture.

And the sun is practically camped out overhead.

She strode through the hospital halls, a bored expression on her face. As she continued walking down the hall as though she were kicking a pebble, eventually she left her ward and found herself in the general waiting room.

Despite the afternoon hour, the number of patients had not decreased. The floor was in confusion, so crowded that it was hard to imagine this was actually a hospital. There had to be more than one hundred people there.

I guess they're all sick.

Negative energy seemed to swirl about the room, and Midori's expression naturally darkened. She was just about to turn on her heel and make her escape when she noticed something strange about all of the patients. Her gaze was drawn to their heads.

Those are those micro-monocle whatsits?

And it wasn't just one or two of them. A large percentage were wearing M2Ds, terminals in one hand as they muttered what sounded like strange incantations. It was a bizarre sight.

Are they all playing in The World?!

Midori knit her brow. She knew it had been getting popular lately, but did they really need to play in the hospital?

What if it makes the medical equipment malfunction?

As an in-patient, she had mixed feelings about it, but if they were able to play so openly in the hospital, the equipment must have been set up to deal with it.

Midori forced herself to accept it and turned her back on the waiting room to walk out.

She noticed something as she walked through the halls—many of the hospital's inpatients played in *The World*. Upon asking a nurse about it, she was astonished to learn that fully *half* of the patients were players.

"But I understand wanting to run away to *The World*," the elderly nurse had said, her face thoughtful. "The longer your stay in the hospital, the stronger your yearning to go outside. A place they can easily travel to, without worrying about their physical strength—it's a kind of salvation, for them."

She wasn't going to trip over herself by rushing out to play it, but Midori added it to her list of things she could do for a change of pace.

Midori thought she understood. She'd only been here a week before resorting to wandering the halls. It hardly compared to being there for years, as some patients were.

Midori thanked the nurse, and with a meek expression on her face, she returned to her room, walking right up to the window.

The view was dominated by an old shopping arcade. Pedestrian traffic was spotty, and the shops could hardly be said to be prospering, though they had a warmth to them you never felt from big-box retailers.

She looked farther out at a skyscraper that lunged into the air. It was the headquarters of the CC Corp. It wasn't far from there that Midori had lost consciousness and wound up in the hospital.

It barely feels real.

Midori still hadn't really accepted the fact that she was in the hospital. The reason was simple. Despite all the tests, they still had no name for her illness. The stress was beginning to eat away at her heart.

"*The World*, huh?" She thought about the nurse's explanation for its appeal. "I guess she meant in times like these."

A longing for the outside world—perhaps that longing was why *The World* existed. Even if it were artificial, it could replace reality as long as the power was on. If someone found a seed of hope there, it was only natural that they'd be enchanted by it.

Nonetheless, Midori found it hard to imagine herself immersed in this other world. She firmly believed that her stay in the hospital would not be a long one.



It was a gruesome scene. Like a pack of hyenas gathered around a piece of meat, dozens of PKs continued to torment the unresisting boy. They had left no room for sympathy. They only wondered how cruelly they could kill him. That was all they thought of as they swung their weapons, their faces sickeningly gleeful.

Each slice brought a new gush of blood as the corpse was laid bare.

There was no eulogy; all that issued from their mouths were cries and jeers. Their eyes blazed with contempt.

Midori watched from a distance; it was almost like some kind of religious ceremony. Her eyes—two still, clear pools—took in the sight of Adamas' ruined, collapsed form.

Ba-bump.

Her heart pounded in her chest.

A shadow fell over her porcelain face. Midori narrowed her eyes, bit her lip, and clenched her hands into fists.

Silabus and Gaspard were next to her. They looked back and forth from Midori to the PKs, puzzled.

"What're you doing, dying so easy?" Bordeaux drawled, looking down at the collapsed Adamas. "I told you we weren't gonna make it easy for you."

Bordeaux's face twisted, at once joyful and ugly. Just as it seemed she was about to cackle evilly, she used the potion of resurrection.

Immediately, Adamas' body was engulfed in a veil of divine light. Going against natural law, he was brought back to life.

Adamas' closed eyes slowly opened. In them was strength of will.

Whether she noticed that strength or not, Bordeaux's evil countenance laughed long and loud, before she plunged her sword into his chest.

Adamas' expression was unwavering. He didn't seem threatened at all; if anything, he was unworried.

Bordeaux was not amused. She clucked her tongue ostentatiously and brought her sword down on him. Adamas doubled over,

collapsing to his knees. The PKs took this as a signal to redouble their efforts on him.

"Ooohhh, I can't bear to watch!" Gaspard covered both of his eyes, blocking his vision.

For her part, Midori felt the same, but she couldn't very well look away. Come what may, she felt she had a duty to watch until the bitter end.

Adamas collapsed to the earth. Countless weapons bore down on him to deliver the final blow, burying themselves in Adamas' body.

Ba-bump ba-bump!

Midori's heart thumped palpably in her chest. She felt something begin to bloom within her. There was no time to try to understand the feeling, though, as Bordeaux used another resurrection potion; yet again, Adamas' body was offered up to the beasts.

"It's horrible!" said Silabus, his face clouded.

But Midori did not hear him. Her attention was focused unblinkingly on Bordeaux and the PKs that she led.

Her heart pounded. Blood raced through her body, hot. No, not just hot—it burned, as though anything that touched her would be scorched.

The thing within her grew with alarming rapidity. Its tentacles extended in every direction, binding her heart.

Bordeaux and her PKs continued violating Adamas. He was unresisting, wordlessly bleeding out his life.

"Adamas," Midori murmured his name as she unsheathed her broadsword, the Dragonblossom. She gripped it in her right hand; it was larger still than Midori herself.

Normally, she was the one being attacked, and thus she did not wield a weapon. The sensation was momentarily strange, but then the feel of the hilt in her hand became oddly familiar.

She had long ago passed the limit of what she could bear. It was malice and hatred that bloomed in her chest and rushed through her limbs with such force that it seemed it might physically burst from her.

Midori waved the Dragonblossom left and right, reassuring herself of its feel. It split the air with a *whoosh*. The wind it stirred up fluttered her robes. She felt no weight from the blade; it moved easily, like any other part of her body.

She exhaled quietly, steeling herself, when Silabus put his hand on her shoulder. He looked her in the eyes and shook his head slowly. "I think we should just watch," said Silabus in a calm voice.

"But—" Midori began to protest, but Silabus held her back.

"Look at him. I don't think he's only being killed."

"Huh?" Gaspard cocked his head, leaning forward and trying to see. He blinked, his face thoughtful, before he continued, indignant: "But he's getting beat up!"

Just as Gaspard said, Adamas was being soundly beaten.

He'd now died any number of times—it was doubtful even Adamas himself knew the exact count.

The air was filled with a strange energy, and the PKs were intoxicated by it, having completely abandoned themselves to the violence.

Midori restrained her urge to jump into the fray only by sheer force of will, and she glared forward, her body trembling.

"If he's letting himself get killed over and over like that, he must have thought of something. If he'd wanted to run, he could have. There's no obvious reason to put himself through this, otherwise."

Midori continued to focus on Adamas even as Silabus spoke. For a moment, she felt as though she met Adamas' eyes. Still silent, Midori lowered her sword. Somehow she understood his aim.

"Maybe this is justice, for him," said Midori flatly.

"Justice? Justice for what?" said Silabus, twisting his neck.

Midori did not answer as she continued to watch Adamas. She was not certain. But as she'd worked with her partner Adamas over time, she'd come to harbor a certain irrational certainty about him.

He was trying to obtain true strength, to force his weak self to be reborn.

The timid boy wanted to be truly strong—not just pretend at having strength. Midori realized this, and forced herself not to come to his aid. She would not waste his courage.

Adamas continued to die, over and over, a beatific, enlightened look on his face.

Infuriated by this, Bordeaux and the other PKs only escalated their violence. It was a gruesome, nauseating scene.

Does the cruelty of humans know no limit?

Seeing this display of inhumanity, Midori's face twisted as though assaulted by some noxious stench.

Suddenly, a gust of wind rushed past Midori. Her long black hair stirred in the wind, though she remained unmoving.

Though she knew it was impossible, she thought she smelled blood.

As they continued to watch Bordeaux's violence, Silabus, Gaspard, and Midori turned around simultaneously when they felt something behind them.

"Did you guys feel a tingle just now?" asked Gaspard, blinking rapidly.

"What was that? I don't think it was a PK," Silabus muttered, likewise not quite grasping the situation.

It really didn't feel like a PK.

The PCs that were appearing in the teleporter one after another were of all different species and classes. The one thing they had in common was a lack of tension, as though they had simply come to a picnic.

"Oh! They're really going at it!" cried out one of the PCs as soon as he caught sight of Adamas' execution grounds, running over near Midori and the rest. Immediately thereafter rose shouts from the PCs, and in the twinkling of an eye, Midori, Silabus, and Gaspard were part of a much larger crowd.

Silabus leaned over and whispered to Midori: "What the heck is going on?"

"Ummm, ummm..." Gaspard groaned, slapping his large belly. After a while he stopped, nodded with satisfaction, and turned to Midori.

"It looks like maybe someone posted to the board!" he said, flailing his hands excitedly.

"Oh, the board."

Someone must have posted information about the lynching at Arche Koeln Waterfall. That would explain all the PCs suddenly gathering here.

Naturally, none of them intended to help Adamas. To these rubberneckers, his execution was only one among many events in *The World*, which made it a party.

The thought of it filled Midori with a terrible rage. As she tried to force the flames of anger down, they only burned hotter. She wanted to take her Dragonblossom and kill every last one of them. Her hand trembled as it gripped the sword's hilt.

"Whoa, what's that?" squealed a girl's voice.

Surprised, Midori turned to see a lone Harvest Cleric, dressed imposingly in mostly white clothes. He seemed vaguely nurse-like.

"Why is no one stopping them?" The Harvest Cleric spoke clearly, openly expressing his displeasure. But the excited onlookers did not turn to see him; they only continued their shouting.

But it would not stay that way. One of the spectator PCs put hand to sword and joined in the execution. That was all it took to start PC after PC turning PK.

Midori's eyes widened. "How...?"

The only reason she'd allowed Bordeaux's violence to continue was to honor Adamas' wishes, but that had been crushed beneath the feet of this senseless mob. It was meaningless.

I won't forgive this. Midori readied her broadsword and looked steadily ahead. She saw only countless villains.

"Midori?" Silabus spoke up, evidently noticing her anger.

"Are you thinking of going out there?" asked Gaspard uncertainly.

"They're no better than murderers," spat Midori, taking a step forward.

"N-n-no! You can't! You'll be killed!"

Midori smiled at the desperate Gaspard, slowly shaking her head. "I'm not afraid of death. What I'm afraid of is losing my heart," she said then looked out ahead. She was ready.

"Well, crap. I don't like fighting, but I guess I can help out," said Silabus with a rueful grin as he drew his sword.

"I guess I'll hang back and give support from here. I'm pretty low-level, so I don't know how much good it'll do."

Clearly these two far preferred camaraderie to combat. They had nothing to do with bloodbaths like this.

"Thank you." Midori bowed.

The next moment, her smile was gone, replaced by a concentrated look of keen battle instinct. The terrible flames within her roared, becoming a source of power. Her heart pounded violently, her breath running ragged, even though she had not yet begun to run. It was dizzying

Ba-bump.

Her heart beat once with incredible force.

Simultaneously, a dark emotion took over her body. It began to erode her reason as the bestial face she kept hidden within her surfaced. Before she realized its true shape, she leapt forward as though pushed. She became the rushing wind, monstrous as she swept an arc with the broadsword in her hand. Her teeth were bared, her entire body radiated bloodlust, and her keen gaze impaled all who met it.

In a moment, there was no longer any distance between her and the PKs.

There were at least fifty of them in total. She couldn't possibly take them all on; there was a wall of PCs in front of her.

Yet strangely, because of the passion that was controlling her, Midori felt no fear. Defeating them all might well have been impossible, but she also saw no reason why she would lose—which was proof that her judgment had deteriorated significantly.

But that was good. Her normal sense of control was not always desirable. Sometimes people needed to give over to rage. Now was one such time.

Midori swung the Dragonblossom sideways. The blade glittered as it if were giving off its own light, and a pressure wave ripped through the air. The paving stones at her feet were jarred free in a swirl of dust.

"Huh?"

A blank-faced Lord Partizan looked at Midori then sank quietly to the ground. She used his body as a stepping stone,

jumping into the air and raising her broadsword high. She then looked down at the group of PKs.

"What the hell?" Bordeaux was on the front line as she tortured Adamas, but she stopped and looked up, furrowing her brow and narrowing her eyes.

"Hah!" With a hoarse, exhilarated cry, Midori slashed into the center of the mob. She buried her anger, bitterness, despair, and even pity deep within herself, focusing her energy on attacking the foes directly in front of her.

The Dragonblossom raged, roaring in answer to Midori's emotions. She brandished it high, bringing it down with all her might.

"What the hell is this?!" Bordeaux lost her composure. Realizing she was being attacked, she looked around for an avenue of retreat, but found none—she had been wielding her sword in the very center of the group of PKs.

"Tch!" Bordeaux clucked her tongue; Negimaru was next to her, so she grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and shoved him in front of her.

"Boss, what're you—" Negimaru started to ask, his expression aloof and ignorant. He didn't understand the situation.

"Sorry, Negimaru m'boy."

"Huh?"

"I'll bring you right back to life, okay?"

"Huh?!"

Midori's attack hit Negimaru with full force, his expression still one of total incomprehension.

"What? Huh? B-boss?!"

The Dragonblossom slammed into the earth before Negimaru even had time to fall, sending out a powerful shock wave. With Midori at its center, it blasted into the surrounding PKs.

But the experienced fighters held their ground and soon began to regain their stances.

Midori looked down to Adamas, who lay at her feet. He was facedown, completely unmoving. He looked to have been carelessly thrown there. He was dead, though of course his player was alive. He would know that Midori was there beside him.

Without using Resurrect, she pulled her broadsword out of the earth and glared at Bordeaux. Even if she were to bring Adamas back to life, there was an excellent chance he'd be struck down again. He should've at least teleported out, but apparently that was not his aim, and this was no time for him to explain his reasoning.

"Quite a guest we've got today!" said Bordeaux with a vulgar smile as she looked at Midori appraisingly. "You've got guts, I'll give you that, but you're not too smart, are you?"

A sneer played on her lips as Bordeaux snapped her fingers once. The fallen PKs began to rise like so many zombies. She might have used a Resurrect.

Midori ignored the small-fry and pointed her sword at Bordeaux.

"Look, sweetie, what do you think you're gonna do all by yourself?" asked Bordeaux. "You're gonna make me laugh. It's just a game, get it?"

Midori silently stared down Bordeaux. Answering her was unthinkable; she found it disgusting to be even breathing the same air.

The PKs continued to recover, but she had no intention of engaging them. What she wanted was Bordeaux's head. Getting it would change the situation dramatically.

She held the Dragonblossom at the ready, looked steadily at her target, and then charged. Bordeaux immediately ducked behind the body of another PK.

"Coward!" Midori howled, springing at the sturdy PKs that blocked her way.

Her opponents were diverse, from every class *The World* had to offer. That was a trivial detail, though. They were obstacles to be cut down and stepped over on the way to her goal.

A Twin Blade, Blade Brandier, and Lord Partizan rushed Midori, sweeping, striking, and stabbing, respectively. She knew their swordsmanship, though, as if the path of their attacks were plotted before her very eyes. She evaded, blocking a strike incidentally with her sword before leaping and returning the attack.

She felt the dull impacts through the hilt of her sword—the sensation that told her she had dealt them death. The feeling went from hilt to hand, from hand to arm, from arm throughout the rest of her body, numbing her brain. It gave her an indescribable shudder of pleasure.

"Aaaaagh!" The devastated PKs cried out in agony. They fell to the ground, groveling. It was just as she looked at their unsightly forms that her heart started clenching in her chest.

Ba-bump.

A smile appeared on Midori's lips.

"Huh?" Midori suddenly murmured.

She hastily tried to erase the expression, but her face would not return to normal, as though she had forgotten how.

I'm enjoying this?! She paled as she came to the realization. *At this rate, I'm no different from them.*

It was just as she was coming to this depressing conclusion that the sound of an explosion came from behind her.

Her vision turned white, and she was pushed bodily forward. Pain shot through her as though she'd been touched by a red-hot brand, and she cried out. Falling to her knees, she looked back to see the barrel of a Steam Gunner's weapon pointed at her. The strange aura that was focusing around the muzzle told her that a second shot was imminent.

I'm going to die.

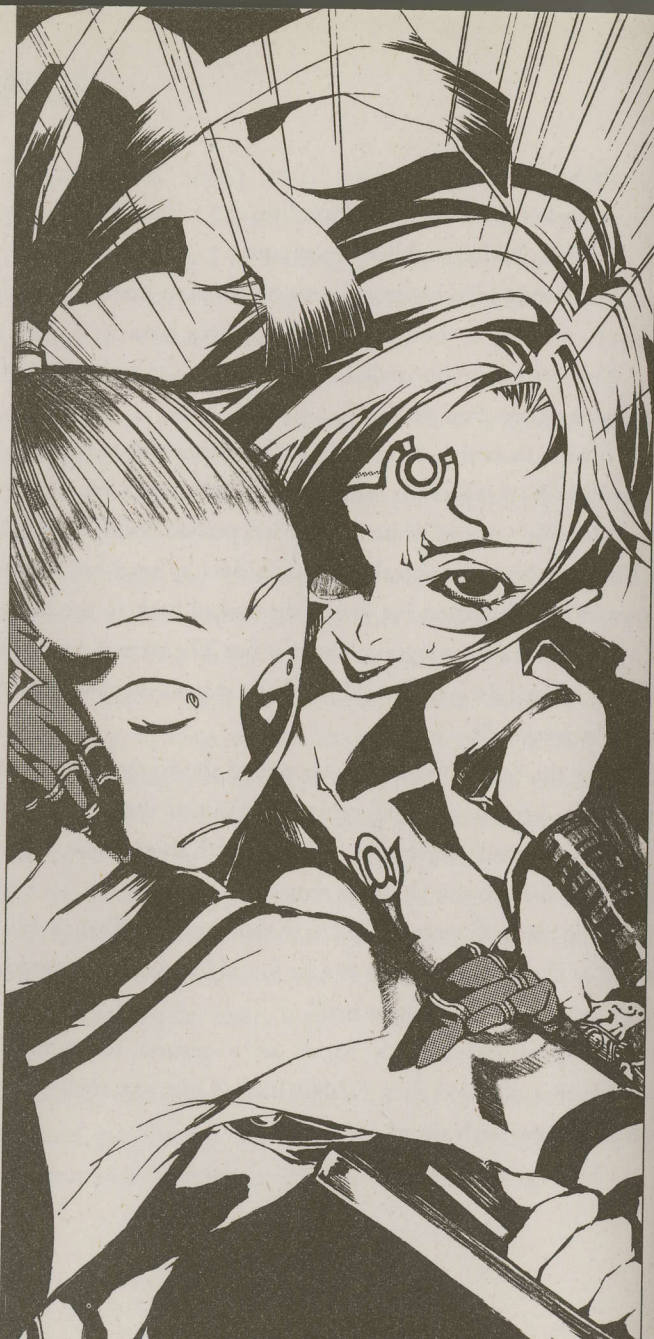
But the Steam Gunner never pulled the trigger. He never got the chance, because a fireball came flying out of the sky and hit him square-on. It wasn't much of a fireball as such things went, but it was enough to disturb the Gunner's aim.

The Steam Gunner looked to the source of the fireball. His gaze moved as if pulled, and at its end he found Gaspard, who twitched.

"Aaack, he's looking at me!"

Gaspard raised both hands in a gesture of capitulation, running this way and that. Silabus backed him up, challenging the Steam Gunner with sword in hand.

They're gonna get themselves killed!



With a grimace, Midori overcame the pain and got to her feet. Just then, her body was surrounded by a faint glow. The sunbeam-like light healed her wounds on the spot. It was a restoration spell.

What's going on?

The unexpected support was coming from the Harvest Cleric she'd seen earlier.

"Hang in there! If you get killed, I'll heal you up, so go ahead and get the crap beaten out of you!"

Midori grinned at the Harvest Cleric's somewhat irresponsible encouragement, then she readied her broadsword. She was resolute, impossible to catch off guard. She realized that the malice that had filled her heart was gone.

Then, as if that were some kind of signal, the field sprang into motion. It was Midori who cut through the ranks. She swung the Dragonblossom wildly left and right. Hers was a beautiful dance, and she made Arche Koeln Waterfall her stage.

Silabus and Gaspard struggled valiantly against the Steam Gunner. The unnamed Harvest Cleric continued to heal their wounds as they fought. The PKs—Bordeaux first and foremost—were at a loss as to how to handle Midori. Midori realized that the spectators were intruding as well, and it was becoming chaotic enough just trying to tell who was friend and who was foe.

I guess it's really a party, now. The area was filled with a confusion of emotions. *This could be my chance.*

Adamas was still collapsed on the ground, but there was no way she was going to let this opportunity go by.

She began to run toward him, when suddenly a Tribal Grappler appeared in front of her and uttered a hoarse scream. "Yaaaaa!" The muscle-bound fighter craned his neck back and howled like a baying wolf.

The next instant, everyone fell silent.

The Tribal Grappler's cry echoed throughout Arche Koeln Waterfall. It was an animalistic howl, but there was something off about it, as though within the scream were hidden the words of some impenetrable language.

The cry grew wilder and wilder, explosion-like—it was ear-splittingly loud. The Grappler thrust both hands into the air, quivering, as though reaching for something invisible.

"What's this, now?!" Bordeaux yelled as her face tensed, looking at the Tribal Grappler. She had lost the will to fight, her attention focused solely on the strange sight before her. Midori was the same.

"He's one of yours, right?" asked Midori.

"What? Hell if I know a weirdo like that," shot back Bordeaux.

"He was tormenting Adamas just like you were."

"Hey, I know a lot of idiots, but that one's just straight-up crazy," said Bordeaux, gesturing at the Tribal Grappler with her chin.

He is acting strangely.

The Tribal Grappler looked as though he were going mad.

But that wasn't an explanation that Midori could accept. It was true that NPCs could act strangely due to system bugs. But if there was a connection failure, a PC would simply freeze up, not go mad. Of course, if this was part of his role-playing, that was a different matter.

So, he's...?

Ignoring Midori as she took in the scene, the gathered PKs and spectators started to escape, driven off by the noise. Meanwhile, the Tribal Grappler let his arms go slack as he slumped over, his posture strangely hunched. The life seemed to drain from his face; his eye sockets turned hollow as the light went out of his eyes. It could be some kind of status effect, in which case it would not be strange for him to behave abnormally.

A chill ran over Midori's body, as if she'd been doused with cold water. An instinctual panic rose within her; her body trembled.

The Tribal Grappler's tongue lolled out of his mouth and his eyes rolled aimlessly. No, not his—*its*. It was no PC anymore, but some kind of revenant.

Dipping low like a predator searching for prey, the Tribal Grappler cast its eyes to the nearest player. The next instant, it had closed the distance between itself and the Blade Brandier, who stood there dumbly as the Grappler knocked him easily off his feet. The Blade Brandier flew into the air, spinning, and hit the ground head-first.

The Tribal Grappler did not stop moving. It attacked every PC that entered its field of vision. It was a bloodbath. The thing offered no quarter or opportunity for counterattack.

Confusion reigned in the area as it attacked with no obvious goal.

The next sacrifice was a Macabre Dancer; the Tribal Grappler continued to swing its fists. It executed a sloppy uppercut, which caught the Dancer under the chin.

"Urgh!"

The Macabre Dancer never got a chance to dance before going flying through the air. The model's texture flickered, exposing a skeleton-like bare object.

"Boss, what the heck's that?!" Negimaru scrambled desperately to get close to Bordeaux.

"How the hell should I know?" Bordeaux shot back, not even looking at Negimaru.

So what is...?

There were no attacks or spells that could affect a character model that way. It would destroy the view of the game's world.

Midori fumbled for an answer as she watched the scattering PCs try to escape. The conclusion soon came to her. "A bug?"

As soon as Midori said it, the sharp-eared Bordeaux sniffed. "I see how it is."

"How what is, boss?"

"It's a bug, you dope. It's gotta be a bug," she said, as though she had been the one to figure it out—and, of course, Negimaru was impressed.

"But still," Bordeaux sighed, giving Midori a sidelong look, "if you're tangled up in this, it's gotta be bad news. A plague, maybe?"

"That's—" That's my line, Midori started to say, but stopped herself. She had not the slightest intention of having a conversation with Bordeaux.

But is that really a bug? It was the conclusion she'd come to, but something seemed wrong. *There's something else going on here. It's...*

Just as she arrived at the idea, the image of a PC cloaked in blue flame appeared in her mind. *Tri-Edge?*

She tried to pull up the uncertain memory but found it difficult. To be sure, Tri-Edge didn't have anything to do with what was going on here.

Guess it was just my imagination.

Perhaps because they'd decided the Tribal Grappler was afflicted with some kind of bug, the panic immediately began to dissipate; it seemed now to be an event to enjoy, not a threat to escape.

Here and there, the PCs readied their weapons and faced the Tribal Grappler.

"Gurh! Ahhhhhh!" The Grappler uttered a strange vocalization, neither a scream nor a cry, nor a shout, as it waved its arms wildly. A group of PCs swarmed around it. "Grruaaaaa!" The thing swung its fists wildly, sending several PCs flying, their textures scattering wildly. It was a strange sight.

"Hey!"

Midori turned around at the voice that called to her from behind. Silabus and Gaspard were running up to her, breathless. The Harvest Cleric did not seem to be with them.

"Things are getting pretty awful," said Silabus, slumping.

"We gotta get ourselves outta here!" said Gaspard tearfully.

"Yeah, but first I need to revive Adamas."

The problem was, Adamas' body was nearby the Tribal Grappler. Getting close would result in combat. But she couldn't leave him there, either. The insane Grappler was starting to destroy random objects in addition to PCs in the area.

There was no guarantee that if they were to get hit, there wouldn't be unexpected consequences. In the worst case, it was conceivable that character data could be lost.

The PCs were starting to panic again as this realization sank in. Losing character data meant that the countless hours spent leveling up would be gone forever. They scattered, fleeing the area as fast as they possibly could. Midori noticed that Bordeaux was nowhere to be seen—she must have discerned the danger and made herself scarce. It was just what Midori would have expected from Bordeaux.

"Guess I'll have to do it," said Midori. She resigned herself to the task, then, Dragonblossom in hand, plunged into the confusion. She didn't know if she would be able to stop the Tribal Grappler, but now was her only chance.

"Leave Adamas to me!" shouted Silabus.

"Good luck!"

With Gaspard's tremulous encouragement at her back, Midori closed the distance between her and the Tribal Grappler.

"Grah!" The Grappler's sledgehammer of an arm came at her before she had a chance to swing her broadsword, the blow aimed squarely at her face and coming directly at her. Midori twisted sideways and avoided the blow, then brought her sword down on the extended right arm. The Tribal Grappler's limb fell to the ground, severed at the upper arm. It twitched there like a lizard tail then was still.

"AAAAAAAHHH!" The repulsive howl echoed across the area.

Midori's shapely face contorted at the hair-raising sound. A flicker of fear bloomed within her, giving rise to a gap in her defenses.

The Tribal Grappler charged, its left shoulder thrust forward like a linebacker. The blow connected, throwing Midori easily into the air like a wind-tossed autumn leaf.

It was like getting hit by a car.

Then came the sensation of every bone in her body being smashed to atoms. Her vision turned white and she seemed about to faint, but bracing her legs, she held herself together—but she was unable to avoid tumbling backwards.

"Tch!" Midori hit the ground and immediately sprung to her feet, looking ahead.

The Tribal Grappler swayed crazily, gazing at Midori with deep, black eyes.

What now? There was no need to defeat it. Engaging it in proper combat was absurd. All she needed to do to save Adamas was buy a little time. *Still, that's a little more than I can manage, I guess.*

She had just decided it was a risk she would have to take when some of the PCs that had been mere spectators a moment ago came to her rescue.

"Aw, I can't stand to watch this. Guess I'll help," said one.

"I filed a bug report with CC Corp. I'll do what I can," chimed in another.

"If we can solve it on our own, we should, right? I mean, this is our world and all," said a third.

The three bantering PCs joined the fray, their weapons grasped boldly in hand. They seemed to know and trust each other; they began attacking with precision and efficiency. Their cooperation was matched by their significant skill.

But even for them, the Tribal Grappler was too much to handle, and it didn't seem to be taking much damage.

"Gotcha!" Midori held her broadsword in both hands and glared at the Grappler. It made jerky, unnatural movements, looking

like some kind of badly constructed robot as the trio of attackers teased it.

I guess The World isn't such a bad place after all. Midori focused her rising spirit into her sword, and leapt—danced, really—forward.

The Tribal Grappler's head flew into the air.

It cried out in the agony of its death throes; its headless body listed forward and fell. It hit the ground with a dull, sandbag-like thud that kicked up the dust around it and echoed through the area.

Its arms and legs continued to twitch after it fell, and from its mouth came a teeth-jarring noise that sounded like a broken speaker. But that did not last long. Instead of blood flowing out of its body, its textures were stripped off, and the bare character model began to disintegrate, its fragments becoming litter that was scattered by the wind.

Midori had delivered the final blow. Her preternaturally swift broadsword had decapitated the Grappler, who no doubt didn't even have time to realize what had happened. *But hat was wrong with him?*

She had heard of strange phenomena happening in *The World* before, but there was no evidence that this was related to those rumors. The CC Corp probably wouldn't say anything about it—not that they were communicative even at the best of times.

Maybe I can find something out on the boards.

But there was no way to verify the truth of information on the boards. There was an excellent chance that this whole business would just remain unexplained.

"Hey, that was a pretty sweet event."

"No kidding!"

"Yeah, the game-managed events are always so boring."

The three-player party that had helped take down the Tribal Grappler started saying their vague goodbyes. Perhaps they had other business at Arche Koeln Waterfall.

A fair number of players remained in the area, taking in the spectacle to the very end. They'd watched the battle with the Tribal Grappler as though it had been some kind of play. Midori's heart was filled with anger, so before she lost her cool at them, she directed her attention elsewhere.

A black-clad Adept Rogue was standing there within the crowd of rubbernecks. His arms were folded, and his piercing gaze was directed at Midori. Her eyes met his for a moment. He smirked, then turned and began to walk away, raising his right hand as he left.

Midori had no idea why he was there, but there was a good chance that his intuition as a PKK had drawn him to the place.

"Hey!" Gaspard called out in his incongruously foolish voice. Silabus was right beside him. The two of them waved to Midori, huge grins on their faces. Next to them was Adamas' collapsed body.

Just as she was about to go to his side, there was an emergency maintenance message from CC Corp. *A little late*, Midori thought.

BECAUSE OF ANOMALOUS SYSTEM PERFORMANCE.
WE WILL BE PERFORMING EMERGENCY MAINTENANCE

.hack//Cell

IN THIS AREA IN FIVE MINUTES. PLAYERS IN THIS AREA ARE ASKED TO EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY.

Midori put her weapon away as she listened to the announcement, then she sighed deeply, striding swiftly to where Adamas lay.

She dropped to her knees beside him and used a Resurrect. The light overflowed and gathered up the scattered pieces of Adamas' soul, replacing them within his body.

His form made Midori queasy. She didn't mean that in a bad way—there was no visible change to his body, but something about him had definitely changed.

He probably got tougher.

Being killed over and over again, some part of him had been reborn. The experience—which wasn't far from torture—might have set him on the path to maturity. But whatever his thoughts on the subject were, he still wasn't saying anything.

The system maintenance would happen any minute now.

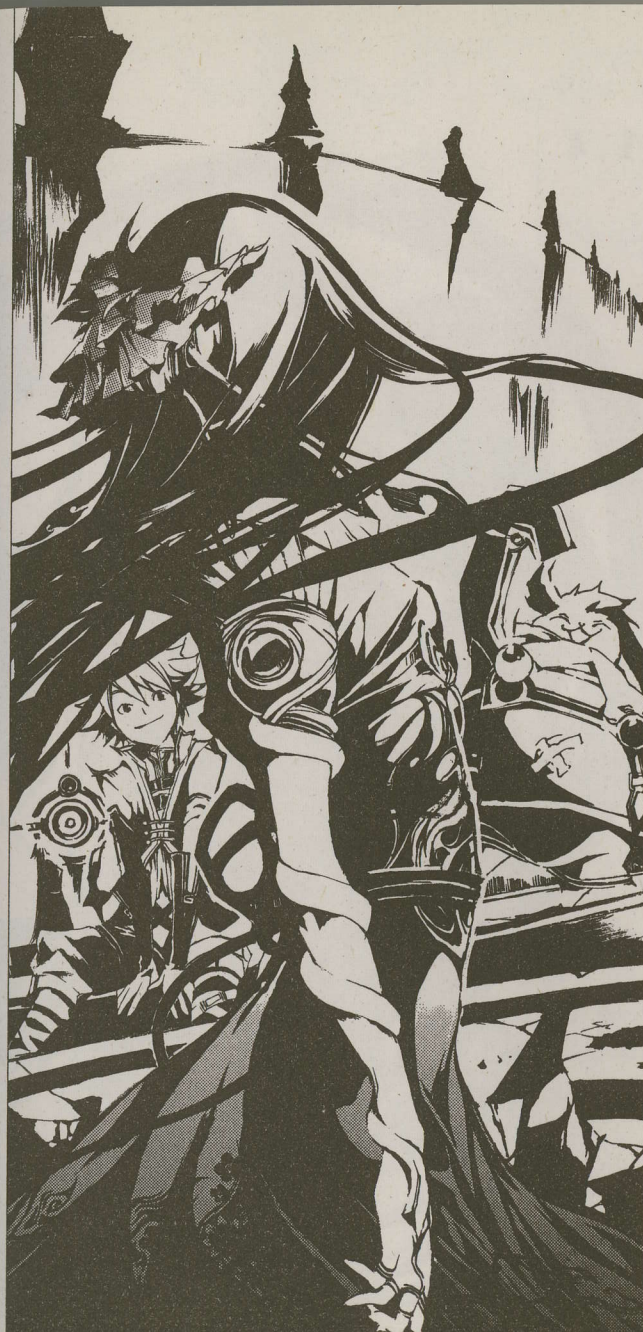
There was just a minute to go when Adamas finally spoke. "Midori, I..."

"It can wait until we get back to the Root Town, right?" Midori's question did not leave any room for refusal.

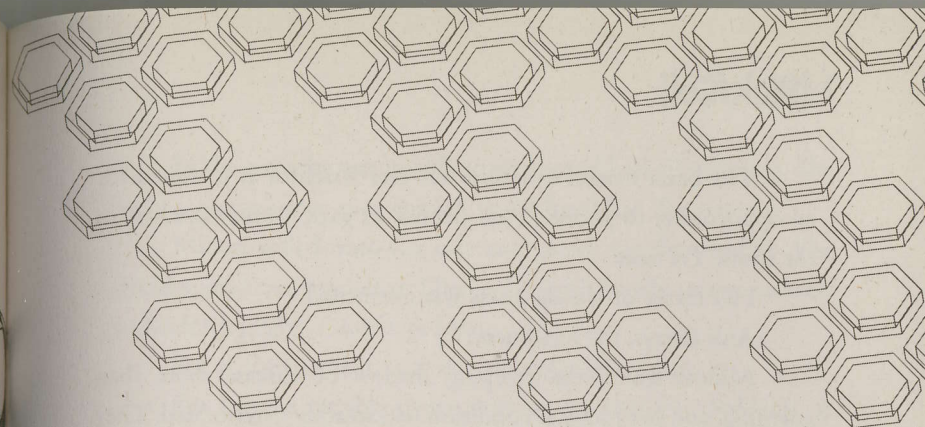
Silabus, Gaspard, and Adamas all agreed, and they prepared to teleport out.

"See you later, okay?" Midori patted Adamas cheerily on the shoulder and waited for him to nod before she teleported away.

However, after that day, Adamas disappeared from *The World*.



VOL. 4



VOL. 4

A pitch-black darkness hung over the hospital room. The surroundings were eerily quiet, save for the small beeps that occasionally issued from medical equipment. The beeps synced up with her heartbeat, playing a strange melody that made it quite impossible for her to sleep.

She looked over to the wall clock; "2 A.M.," it claimed. "The dead of night," she'd heard it called, and now she knew why. Loneliness came and went. The entire world was asleep, leaving only her behind, it seemed. The isolation seeped into her body.

Midori rolled onto her back and brought her knees up, curling into a fetal position. She was trembling. She held her own body tightly to still herself, which seemed to, allay, just slightly, the overwhelming sensation of loneliness.

But that was all.

The beast named isolation was ever watchful as it waited for an opportunity to pounce. And she felt its gaze from everywhere in the room. *I'm scared.*

Her terror of the darkness was instinctual.

And always, the loneliness.

Midori feared the creeping shadow of disease more than anything, and her physical condition had steadily deteriorated. They still had no name for her affliction. All that was certain was that her body was being attacked, and the more it worsened, the more time she spent in bed.

Nonetheless, she tried to focus on moving forward, but as time passed, that resolve began to wither. Her enemy was shapeless, making it impossible to fight.

Her trembling was becoming worse. She held her own collapsing body and tried to fight off the shaking, but it was no use. The shivers rolled in like waves, and like waves, she was unable to hold them back.

Midori squeezed her eyes shut and waited for time to pass—waited with all of her might. If dawn would only break, then at least she would have a reprieve from the darkness and loneliness. She waited for the dawn that would be her salvation.

At some point in that eternity, she finally dozed off.

She did not feel well upon waking.

Far from disappearing, the fatigue had worsened; it was oozing into her, piling up. It was clear that the extreme sleep deprivation and the stress on her heart were taking a toll on her body.

In the end, she was unable to get out of bed all morning. She had no energy—not even enough to eat breakfast. *I'm so tired.*

Midori rolled onto her side and gazed out the window. The world spread out beyond it, filled with light, totally unsympathetic to Midori's plight. *I want to go home.*

But at the moment, that was an impossible dream.

She became terribly melancholy at the thought. Suddenly, it seemed as though the cloak of twilight had descended over the world. *What if I never get better?*

The worst-case scenario flashed through her mind.

She shook her head quickly, but the persistent thought would not leave. Indeed, it seemed almost inevitable. A chill ran over her, making her shiver. But the shiver didn't stop. It got worse. *What does it mean, to die?*

The ceasing of all physical functions, that was death. Obviously. *But what about the mind?*

Midori wasn't the kind of daydreamer that spent time thinking about "the other side." She was a realist. All that came to mind was an image of a decaying body turning back into dirt. It assailed her, strangely vivid.

She was going to die eventually. She was well aware of that, of course. But now that it was right in front of her, it was not so easy to take.

This is bad. I shouldn't just lay here thinking pointless things.

She forced an orbit correction on her negative thoughts, chasing them to a corner of her mind. It wouldn't be that simple

to forget them, but she decided to force them from her mind for a while, anyway.

Midori exhaled softly. "All right," she said, as if to encourage herself. Then, taking a whip to the lethargy that enveloped her body, she forced herself to a sitting position. She immediately was hit with a wave of dizziness that made the world tilt crazily, but by holding steady, she was able to gradually overcome it. "Geez."

Midori relaxed her shoulders then opened the window to dispel the room's stagnant air. An avalanche of fresh air rushed in. It carried the tainted hospital air out, and in an instant, the room felt clean.

But the moment she let her guard down, she felt dizzy again. Midori quickly sat down on a corner of the bed to avoid falling on her rear. *Aw, c'mon.*

She smiled bitterly then ran her hand up through her hair. It seemed oddly difficult, though, and her hair felt duller than it should have. When she looked at her palm, she saw that several strands of hair that had come out.

Midori's eyes widened. She was speechless. This was reality. She felt like she'd be slapped across the face. Being brought back to the truth of her situation was a knockout blow. She wanted to collapse on her bed in tears.

The only reason she didn't was the knock on her door.

Before she could even answer, it opened with a certain amount of cheerful gusto.

"Hey there!" It was Kaho, bouncing into the room with aplomb. She had her school uniform on; she raised her book bag in greeting as she came over to Midori. "So, how're you? Incidentally, I'm fine."

"I think I would've been able to put that together on my own." Midori slumped and made a wry face. *I'm ridiculous.*

Her melancholy disappeared as she talked with Kaho.

Kaho wasn't being cheerful just to cheer Midori up. For good or ill, that's just how she was. "I found something good today," said Kaho, her eyes shining.

"Something good?"

"Hee hee. Don't freak out when you see." She smiled slyly then reached into her backpack and pulled out—an M2D terminal.

"Hey, isn't that...?"

"You're not doing anything else anyway, right? It's a great chance, so I brought them over for you to try out." Kaho sat down beside Midori, and with practiced ease, she put on the M2D and started manipulating the controller.

"Hang on just a sec. I'll set it up so you can play," she said, her fingers dancing over the controller with speed that would've terrified a pianist. Midori watched her, half-stunned.

"All right, you're good to go." Kaho took off the M2D, looking at Midori with a grin.

Midori could guess what she was about to do.

"Boom!" Kaho gleefully pounced, forcing the M2D onto Midori's head before Midori had a chance to resist.

It's pitch-black. She cocked her head at not being able to see anything, but then she realized it was because her eyes were closed.

Midori smiled at her mistake then carefully opened her eyes. Her vision blurred at the flood of light that poured into her eyes. The disorientation lasted but an instant. She soon regained her vision, and a vivid world spread out before her. Laser light mingled in midair with flashy neon, coloring the architecture. Her hospital room had been transformed into an entertainment district.

Wait, I remember this.

She'd seen the world in front of her before. She just hadn't actually walked through it, then.

"That's Lumina Cloth, the Root Town of Omega Server. I told you about it before, right?"

Midori nodded as she looked across the street. She let a sigh escape.

Her face meek, she remembered the words of the nurse, earlier:
The World can be a kind of salvation for patients.

Midori was a patient, herself. She should have been able to understand their feelings—but she hadn't understood at all.

The vision before her was an illusion, but it closed in around Midori with an overwhelming sense of reality.

She didn't let it show on her face, but Midori had to admit that it was impressive. If Kaho hadn't been there, she probably would've raised both hands in a gesture of surrender.

"So, whaddya think? Awesome, right?"

"Yeah. I'm kinda... surprised."

"Hee hee."

Midori couldn't see Kaho's expression, but she was sure it was every bit as self-satisfied as it sounded. It was slightly annoying, but there was no getting around the fact that she was impressed.

"See the cute girl in front of you, wearing white?"

Midori looked ahead as she was told, and she saw a demure-looking character wearing a white outfit.

"That's my character. Her name's Kaho, too. She's a cutie just like me, doncha think?"

"I'll allow that the character is cute, but I don't think I can go so far as to say it looks like you."

"Urgh. Odious girl!" Yet Kaho was undaunted as she continued: "Now, as for class—she's a Harvest Cleric."

"Harvest Cleric?"

"Her job is to heal her comrades."

"Like a nurse?" Midori asked.

"Something like that."

Despite hearing the explanation, any kind of real understanding was still far away—but she was starting to get some idea of what kind of place *The World* was.

"Too bad Harvest Clerics' power doesn't work in the real world," said Kaho with uncharacteristic sadness. "If we could cure your sickness with magic..."

"Don't worry, I can take care of myself," said Midori firmly. She pushed down the uncertainty she felt in her chest. "So, if I were to play, what class should I use?"

"Hmm, good question," replied Kaho, hemming a bit as she thought it over. "You seem like the type who'd like swinging a sword around, so what about an Edge Punisher?"

"An Edge Punisher?" Midori had no idea what kind of class that was.

But somewhere along the way, Midori's heart had turned toward *The World*.



A gentle breeze blew across the grass plain. Everything was bathed in brilliant sunlight, so warm you could almost feel the springtime in the air.

Midori's long, shiny fall of hair blew in the breeze as she walked serenely across the plain. But in contrast to the surroundings, her heart was clouded, troubled.

She kept moving at that pace for a while, then eventually she saw a teleporter ahead of her. Around it were gathered a few dozen PCs.

That was hardly unusual.

One of the PCs noticed Midori. That was the trigger for all of them to turn and look at her. Countless gazes were leveled at Midori. They represented the whole gamut of human emotions, from joy to hatred. Of course, the majority of them were fairly murderous.

Midori stopped and confirmed the PCs. She had no connection with any of them—or if she had, it had been purely business. There had been no meaningful interaction. *He's not there, huh?*

Once she'd looked over the group of PCs, she sighed, obviously depressed.

It had been two weeks since Adamas had stopped logging in. Ever since the incident, he'd completely disappeared. He hadn't even sent e-mails, and Midori had no idea where he was or what he was doing. Perhaps he was using another account, or maybe he'd given the game up entirely. The latter possibility seemed more likely, but in either case, Midori's feelings on the matter were left hanging.

She tried to calm herself and began walking again. She hadn't gotten more than a few steps when a Steam Gunner came forward. His whole body gave off a menacing aura, and he pointed his bayonet directly at Midori, evidently seeing no need for discussion.

Midori sighed and continued walking. "You're never gonna be popular with the ladies that way."

No sooner had she murmured the deadpan line than the Steam Gunner's gun spat fire. Midori sidestepped gracefully out of the way and the shot passed by his right side, unharmed.

"If that shot had just hit me," Midori murmured, nonchalant as she kicked off the ground and closed in on the Steam Gunner. In no time at all, the distance between them was closed and the broadsword Dragonblossom was in her hand, its blade speeding toward the Steam Gunner's neck.

"Urk!" The Steam Gunner made a choked sound and slumped. His bloodlust was nowhere to be seen.

Midori sheathed her weapon and put her hands on her hips. "Well, looks like you're not really into it anymore. But you came all this way, so you want to go sixty seconds against me?"

The Steam Gunner made himself scarce without another word. Apparently, she'd forced him to cancel. *Whoops, that's one less customer.*

Midori grinned ruefully, wondering what Adamas would've done. In that moment, she let her guard down for a few brief seconds.

Behind her came a surge of ill intent. Her body reacted reflexively, well before her mind. She hurled herself forward. But that tiny lowering of her defenses brought its price.

"Ugh!" A sharp pain ran up her back. She turned to see a smirking Blade Brandier standing there. The blade he held was long and thin.

"Leave that coward alone and fight me," he said.

"Just sixty seconds, okay?" Midori righted herself and continued. "I'll have to decline any engagement past that. I have the right to choose, after all."

That seemed to make the Blade Brandier angry. Enraged, he charged, brandishing his sword.

"What a simple fellow you are." Midori smirked as she danced aside.

She had no idea how many PCs she'd faced. But her poor condition was obvious, and her body wasn't moving as she needed it to. Her reactions were dulled, as though her limbs were shackled. Many attacks that should never have touched her had gotten through. She'd gotten by with single attacks, but she was still covered in wounds.

Once she'd dealt with all her "customers," Midori crouched down. The grassy plain had regained its calm.

She looked off into the distance. The field seemed to extend into infinity, carpeted in brilliant green. The grass waved in great ripples with the wind, looking for all the world like waves on the sea. If she was quiet, she could even hear wild birdcalls in the air. It was tranquil, the way she imagined the countryside would be. Of course, she had never heard the sounds of her own countryside, so the comparison existed only in her mind.

Midori slowly closed her eyes. As soon as she cut off her vision, her hearing became keener. *The World* was full of sound. It might not have compared with reality, but by any measure, it was overflowing with sounds.

Midori wasn't sure how long she spent there, like that. Eventually, she heard the sound of distant footsteps. The sound was getting closer—slowly, but surely.

Midori slowly opened her eyes and looked in the direction she'd heard the footsteps coming from. There in the distance... The backlit figure was indistinct, but someone was definitely there.

She stood, looking steadily at the approaching figure. The PC, which looked like a boy, finally stopped directly in front of her.

"Welcome back," said Midori. She showed no emotion on her face. Whatever expression she might have made, it would've seemed inappropriate to the occasion.

"It's good to be back," said Adamas.

The exchange was too ordinary to begin to convey any sort of deep emotion. But it was enough. They both knew that overt displays of happiness at their reunion would've seemed weird to each side.

"So, shall we head back to the Root Town?" Midori closed one eye and started walking back to the transporter.

"Listen..."

Midori stopped at the voice from behind her and turned slowly.

"I did a lot of thinking after what happened," said Adams.

"What about?"

"Games and reality. Present, past, future. Other people and myself." Adams ticked off the points on his fingers as he ran down the list.

It was all too abstract for Midori, who could only cock her head in confusion.

"I had a lot of time to think, so I stopped and looked back. On myself."

"What do you mean?" asked Midori.

"I'm not really sure."

"How in the heck am I supposed to understand, then?"

"Yeah, good point," admitted Adams. "But I realized something as I was being killed over and over again."

Midori silently encouraged Adams to continue.

"I think, in the end, I'd embraced some kind of strange illusion. In *The World*, I mean. I thought I'd be able to change, here." He continued as though he were giving his confession in a church. "But no matter what mask I wear, the inside is always gonna be the same. Sure, there are roles we play, but you'll always catch glimpses of the real person underneath. I guess it's obvious. A PC is an incarnation of yourself."

Adamas smiled so brilliantly it was incongruous, without a hint of hesitation. It seemed like he'd made a breakthrough. "You probably already know this, but I'm kinda weak," he said.

"Yeah, I know."

"Heh, really?"

Adamas and Midori met each other's eyes, both shrugging.

"But even so," Adams continued, "I sorta thought that even if I were weak, there were still things I could do. I still think so."

"Every cloud has a silver lining, eh?"

"Maybe. I'm not going to go thanking Bordeaux or anything, though."

"Shall we at least go settle the score?"

"Forget it. She'll just beat the crap outta me again." Adams had a wry smirk as he ducked his head a bit. His face soon regained its seriousness, though. "Listen, um, maybe sometime..." It must have been something hard to say—every word conveyed his nervousness. But Adams shook his head to clear it, and with a resolute expression, he started over: "I was thinking maybe sometime... you'd like to meet up." Adams looked away from Midori. "I mean, it's fine if you don't want to. This is kinda sudden, and maybe it's not convenient."

To say Midori was surprised by the proposal was an understatement. She was frankly stunned. Her heartbeat quickened, and she could feel her body flush.

He wasn't talking about the game anymore—he was talking about real life.

She'd known Adamas for a long time, but Midori didn't know the first thing about him outside of *The World*. She'd never felt any need to. She couldn't begin to imagine what might happen were she to meet him in the real world.

But her hesitation did not last long. It was almost strange that the topic had never come up before.

Midori approached Adamas, practically beaming. "I think that's a lovely idea."

It was decided that she would meet Adamas on Saturday at one o'clock in the afternoon. The place would be directly in front of CyberConnect's new headquarters.

She'd already forgotten who had been the one to propose the location. If they'd stopped to think about it, there were any number of better places to go, but given the place's connection to *The World*, they'd both agreed it was a suitable spot.

They had not decided what to do upon meeting. Would they get something to eat? Would they just hang out? There was always the CyberConnect Museum on the building's first floor, or they could log-in to *The World*—although that would make them no better than the so-called "outdoor shut-ins" everyone was so concerned about lately. Midori's feeling was that if they were going to go to all the trouble to meet up offline, they should take a break from the game. Since meeting up was the real purpose anyway, there was a possibility they'd just stand around and talk, but she was fine with that.

By Friday evening, they hadn't talked concretely about the meeting except to determine the time and place.

I sure hope I can really see him.

If she was so worried about it, she should've done something more, but there was no use regretting it now. And they both had M2Ds, so at the very least, Midori reasoned, they would be able to find each other.

I guess I really am kind of a shut-in.

Midori chuckled wryly at herself, then logged out of *The World*.

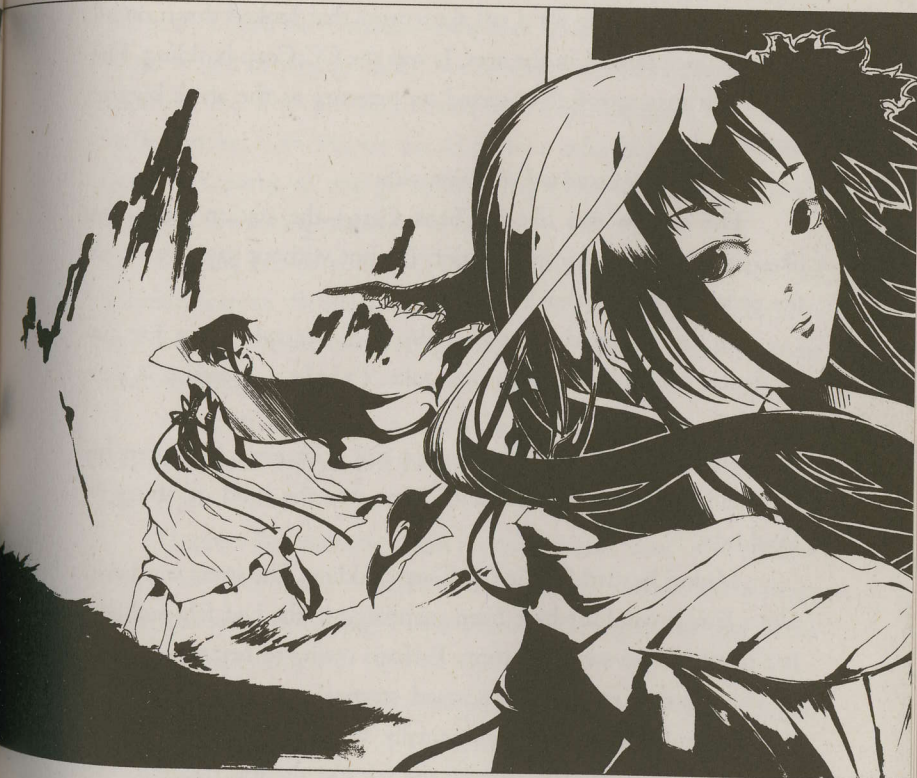
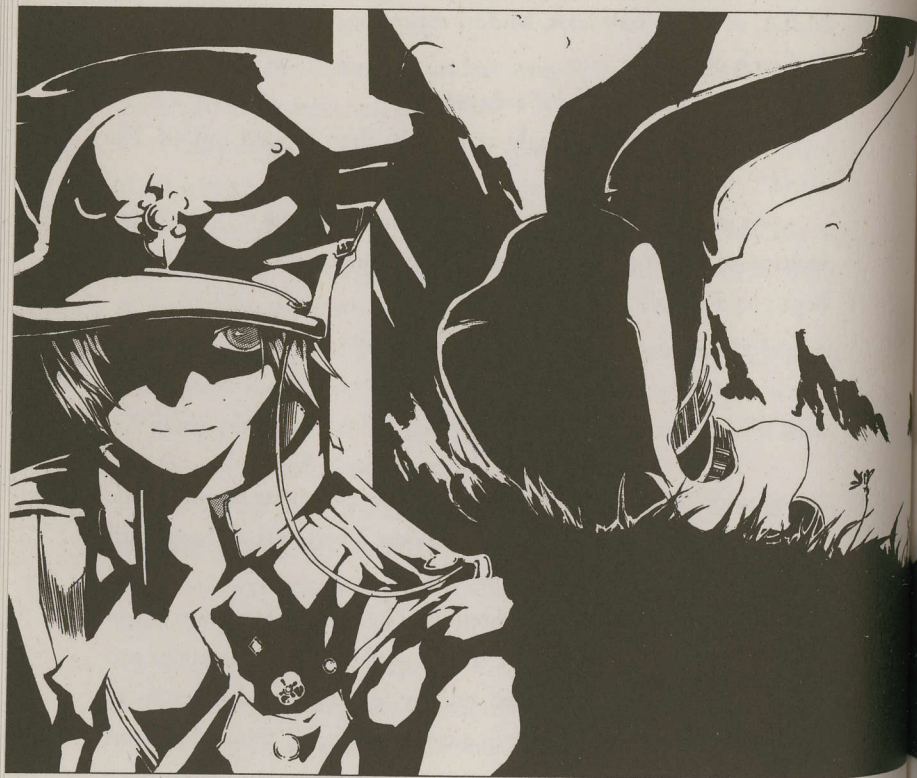
As soon as her vision went black, she was filled with a strange mixture of anticipation and uncertainty. Midori felt pleased as she began to doze off.

Eventually, consciousness faded into sleep.



It was midday on Saturday, and the station front was crowded. She checked the time; it was just shy of noon. There was an hour until they'd arranged to meet up.

Midori looked around carefully. The station front was a jam of pedestrians, the majority of whom were young, between ten and twenty years old. They walked quickly as they exited the station, heading to their various destinations. She didn't think there was anything particularly exciting in this part of town, but maybe there was some centripetal force she was unaware of at work. Something new might well be being born somewhere nearby while she was sitting here, thinking these pointless things.



And at the forefront of this new era were a group that had a strange tendency. They wore M2Ds instead of sunglasses, and they were all walking in the same direction. Following them with her eyes, she saw them heading for a tall skyscraper that looked down on all the other architecture in the area. It was the CC Corp building. The impressive structure fully asserted its presence as the area's biggest landmark.

We must have passed each other somewhere.

The station was like a Chaos Gate—the station front was likewise Mac Anu's central district. It went without saying that all the pedestrians were thus PCs.

Midori followed the passers-by with her eyes—not for any particular reason, just for its own sake. *I wonder if Adamas is in there, somewhere.*

She didn't think he'd be there a full hour early, but given his personality, showing up ahead of time was the kind of thing he would do.

Midori headed for the CC Corp building. The street was lively, like a fair. It wouldn't have been surprising if she had felt mobbed, but there was no such sensation. Perhaps owing to her nervousness, all the external stimulation seemed strangely rarefied. Her senses didn't seem to be functioning normally. It was almost as though her feet weren't touching the ground; she felt like she was floating.

She drifted, ghostlike, eventually drawing near to the CC Corp building. It was crowded in front of the building, despite being a Saturday. Most of the crowd was headed for the CyberConnect

Museum, around which were a few cafes that operated with the blessing of the CC Corp.

Of course, these cafes were not fulfilling their original purpose. They'd been Internet cafes back when the Internet had been at the height of its popularity, but now the world's connections were location-free. The cafes didn't need to be anything more than simple coffee houses now. Players would go to a cafe, hail someone they'd never met, party up, and go adventuring. Cafes had taken on a new function as meeting places.

Having arrived at the CC Corp building, Midori lazily opened a connection to *The World*, choosing its icon from the desktop that was displayed before her eyes. She logged in, and her consciousness went zooming away.

As soon as she recovered from the momentary dizziness, a familiar view spread out before her. It was the Chaos Gate of Mac Anu.

"I guess I'm no better than everybody else, now," said Midori with a sardonic smile. A number of passing PCs gave her strange looks; the same thing might have been happening in the real world for all she knew.

I guess I'm one of the shut-ins, now. Midori shrugged then made for the central dome.

In the real world, it was midday, but Mac Anu was in the thrall of a fiery sunset. The senses did not adjust to such a stark contrast in an instant, but within a few steps, her eyes had adjusted to *The World*.

.hack//Cell

She strode ahead, intrepid. Her feet carried her to the transporter, which she used to teleport to the harbor district. Once there, she headed for the wharf.

The sea was as calm as always, with the setting sun glittering off the surface of the small waves. Midori boarded one of the ships moored there and made for the bow. Ahead, she could see Hy Brasail, the Isle of Kings. The current champion there was a Blade Brandier named Endrance.

Midori sighed as she looked out over the sea, putting her hand to her chest.

She could feel her heartbeat. The rhythmic beats seemed to be more numerous than usual. *Am I nervous?*

It was a little late to do anything about it; her body was naturally reacting.

It's no different from meeting in The World, anyway.

The distinction between the real and imaginary was fuzzy anyway, so she should've been able to show up without any nervousness whatsoever.

I guess this means games and reality are different. It seemed like an utterly obvious conclusion, but realizing it only accelerated her nervousness.

"This isn't like me at all," she said out loud, but then immediately she shook her head in negation. What *was* like her, then?

Unable to clarify that, she killed quite a bit of time just thinking about it.

Midori sighed. Then she remembered to check the time. *Half past twelve, huh? Pretty soon, then.*

Just then, the mail alert icon appeared in her display.

FROM: ADAMAS

SUBJECT: BE THERE IN TEN MINUTES!

I LEFT WITH PLENTY OF TIME TO SPARE,
BUT I GUESS I WON'T BE GETTING THERE FIRST.
WILL I?

OH, RIGHT!

IT'S NOT EXACTLY A GREAT IDENTIFYING
MARK, BUT I'LL BE THE GUY WITH THE BAND-AID
ON MY NOSE. IF YOU WANNA KNOW WHY, WELL, I'LL
TELL YOU WHEN I GET THERE.

SEE YA!

Midori read the message then composed a reply after a moment's thought.

FROM: MIDORI

SUBJECT: RE: BE THERE IN TEN MINUTES!

A BAND-AID ON YOUR NOSE? THIS ISN'T A
COMIC BOOK, Y'KNOW!

BUT THERE'S NOBODY LIKE THAT AROUND, SO
YOU'LL STAND OUT, WHICH IS GOOD.

She quickly typed out the message and was about to send it, when...

Ba-bump.

Her heart thudded strangely in her chest. Immediately thereafter, a sharp pain ran through her, like a needle through her breast. She gripped her shirt as her face twitched in agony.

It wasn't a physical pain. It was an absolute sensation, like a fissure appearing in her very mind. The sensation was so overwhelmingly vivid, she couldn't even cry out.

But it did not last long. The pain was intense enough that it could've made her pass out, but it was so brief, she bore it almost expressionlessly.

"I..." The pain left behind a vague unease. The source was clear. She'd held it down out of sheer force of will, but... *The beast that sleeps within me.*

Midori put her hand to her chest and canceled the e-mail to Adamas. She didn't know why. It wasn't a conscious decision; her body just naturally reacted.

Someday, it's probably going to beat me.

She had a feeling that said defeat would come sooner rather than later. *And what am I going to do then?*

She didn't even have to think about it.

She would turn PK.

That brutal emotion that overflowed—it would be turned not toward monsters, but toward other PCs.

And then, the first one she'd strike with those poisoned fangs would be the one who was always beside her: Adamas.

She saw his smiling face in her mind, then the next moment, it was spattered in blood.

Ba-bump!

Her heart thudded. The beast within her was stirring. *Calm down. Just calm down.*

She exhaled, forcing her nervousness down. The beast seemed to sleep again.

The new mail icon flashed again.

FROM: ADAMAS

SUBJECT: BE THERE SOON!

I CAN SEE THE CC CORP BUILDING.

I SHOULD BE THERE IN ABOUT FIVE MINUTES OR SO.

IT'S LIKE A FESTIVAL AROUND HERE OR SOMETHING, RIGHT?

EVERYBODY'S GOT MZDS ON. [SO DO I, I GUESS.]

BY THE WAY, MIDORI, ARE YOU HERE ALREADY?

Midori stared at it, unable to reply. *I can't, not like this...*

She was in no state to meet him. What would happen to her if she were to meet Adamas in real life? She couldn't even begin to imagine it.

Of course, the chance that nothing would happen was high. Yet she could not sweep away the unease that bloomed within her.

She could not forgive herself for having the potential to become a PK.

Ba-bump. Ba-bump!

The door to her heart began to open with a terrible creaking sound.

Midori's eyes widened. Her breath quickened, and her vision distorted as she began to hyperventilate. Hastily, she turned her mind to something, anything else, as she logged out of *The World*.

But the real world was just as unsteady.

Perhaps because of the dizziness, her gaze turned in strange directions. She seemed to look down on the world. She was frozen by extreme anxiety. It was almost as if it wasn't her own body; she was numb to every external stimulus. Her senses shut off, and she hallucinated that she was nothing but a consciousness, floating.

Just as she was beginning to fear that she was dreaming, her sight returned to where it should have been. But her other senses did not.

It was when she looked ahead that she saw a boy walking, searching his surroundings as though looking for someone. He seemed about high-school age. He was slender, and wore a jacket that was a bit too big for him, looking very much like someone who was no longer a child but not yet an adult. He was looking about rather hastily as he approached—rather suspiciously.

The band-aid. . . Midori glanced at the boy's face, and saw a band-aid stuck across the bridge of his nose. *That's Adamas.* . .

He looked just liked the character he used in *The World*.

Suddenly, her eyes met his.

But apparently she was the only one who thought so; he was looking at someone else. It was weird enough just meeting his gaze.

She noticed that it was now one o'clock: the arranged time. Adamas bounced on his feet, bored, checking his watch and looking around. If Midori was nervous, he obviously was, as well.

Midori did not so much as twitch as she watched him. To be exact, she *couldn't* move. Her anxiety had taken control of her body, and it froze her in place.

She quietly closed her eyes. Cutting off her vision helped isolate her even in the best of times—now it returned her to a pure consciousness, floating in nothingness.

I can't meet him, not now. Midori knew she couldn't meet him until she'd slain the monster that dwelt within her. It was conjecture, of course, but her instinct was raising the alarm.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed. When she opened her tightly shut eyes, the scene that greeted her seemed unreal.

It was the city of Mac Anu, bathed in the reddish light, the ocean on fire with the setting sun as nightfall approached. Midori was still standing on the ship's bow.

Despite not a single thing before her actually existing, it all seemed overwhelmingly real. It was *better* than reality.

"So, my reality..."

Where is it? she finished the sentence in her head.

.hack//Cell

Time had not stopped.

The arranged time had long since passed. Yet Midori still did not move. As though her mind weren't even there, her body stood motionless, a beautifully made mannequin.

At length, the new mail icon popped up again.

FROM: ADAMAS
SUBJECT: LATE?
MIDORI, ARE YOU HERE ALREADY?
I'M IN FRONT OF THE CC CORP BUILDING.
IF YOU'RE HERE, SPEAK UP!
I'M THE GUY WITH THE BAND-AID.

Midori read the message text, motionless.

As she was doing so, another message from Adamas arrived.

FROM: ADAMAS
SUBJECT: DID SOMETHING HAPPEN?
WAS YOUR TRAIN LATE?
OR DID SOMETHING COME UP?
I'LL WAIT A LITTLE LONGER.

If it had been possible, she wanted to meet him at that moment. But it simply could not be. Not until she'd dealt with the malice that slept within her.

FROM: ADAMAS
SUBJECT: I'M WORRIED
PLEASE CONTACT ME.

The e-mails kept coming.

There wasn't a single word of accusation toward her. He was just worried about her. That was all.

Mail continued to arrive. Each message brought a new wave of anguish.

But it did not continue for long. Perhaps he'd become annoyed with her unresponsiveness, or perhaps he'd simply given up, but either way, the messages came to an abrupt stop.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised.

She felt both a sense of relief, as though a great weight had been taken off her chest, along with a keen regret. *No, this is for the best.* She tried to force herself to accept it.

"I *thought* you'd be here," came a sudden voice from behind her.

Midori felt like she'd been struck by lightning. She turned to see none other than Adamas, a look of confusion on his face.

"How'd you know I was here?" Midori asked the obvious question.

"We've known each other a while—I figure I should have some idea of your favorite spots." Adamas continued pleasantly: "I could see you were online, so I figured you'd be here."

"Oh."

It was possible to mask you status and claim to be offline. It was a way to play alone without anyone bothering you, but in her reduced capacity, Midori hadn't thought to set herself invisible.

"What happened?" Adamas asked.

Midori was at a loss as she tried to find the words to answer him. It wasn't something that she could easily explain, and even if she did, it was hard to imagine he would understand. Adamas was the one who finally broke the silence. "We'll have plenty of other chances." He continued, strangely cheerful: "I'll just look forward to meeting you next time. So, yeah. It'll be nice."

"The truth is..." Midori said quietly, looking to Adamas. "I'm in front of CC Corp. I saw a guy with a band-aid on his nose walk right in front of me." Her voice was uninflected, flat.

"Ah." Adamas simply nodded, unsurprised. "The band-aid was pretty lame, huh?" He grinned sheepishly and continued. "Ever since the fight with Bordeaux, I've done a lot of thinking about reality."

And then Adamas started to talk about himself: He was a junior in high school and got picked on a lot, so he'd joined *The World* to make a break from his old, weak self. But in the end, he wasn't going to be able to make that separation by brute force. For good or ill, Bordeaux had made him realize that, he'd said.

"So I decided I'd need to make a fresh start in the real world."

"A fresh start in the real world?"

"Yeah. The band-aid's the proof," he said smoothly with a self-deprecating grin. His voice was calm and confident. "I guess that's real life for you—you get hit and pay the price. Also it hurts."

"So that wound—"

"Yeah, I took a few hits from the guys that pick on me. They didn't kill me, but they didn't really hold back, either."

So Adamas had gotten some guts in the real world, too. It was easy to imagine how much courage that took.

"I hate to say it, but that puts you a step ahead of me," said Midori.

"Huh? What're you talking about?"

Midori turned to Adamas with a bright smile. "It's a secret," she said.

"Huh?"

"Just talking to myself."

"I don't really follow you, but does it have anything to do with me?"

"It sure does," answered Midori. "I think you should be proud of yourself," she said, patting his shoulder lightly.

Midori and Adamas continued their conversation at the harbor district of Mac Anu—in spite of the fact that they were quite close to each other in the real world. It was admittedly quite a waste of effort, but they didn't seem excessively worried about that.

"Well, we're already here, so we should at least hit a dungeon or something."

It was Adamas' suggestion.

"That's rare. Quite a change from the old Adamas!"

"I have to level up sometimes, too, y'know."

"I thought you didn't care about strength anymore?"

"Well, sure; it's not all about power. But nice feelings aren't going to protect anyone," said Adamas with conviction.

"Protect? Protect what?" asked Midori.

Adamas looked down, suddenly bashful. "Hey, even I want to be strong enough to protect someone. I sorta think that's what being strong *is*."

"So you might be protecting *me* someday, is that?"

"Maybe."

"Well, I won't be holding my breath."

"Heh, yeah. It'd just be nice if that happened someday, is all I was thinking. Consider this my declaration of intent," said Adamas with a smile.

He seemed to be serious. If it had been the old Adamas, she would not have been sure. "Plus I don't want to get killed by you again. I've gotta be able to protect myself."

"Huh?" Midori raised her voice in total confusion. "I killed you?"

The instant she said it, the black dread gushed up within her anew. Her heart rate skyrocketed. She started breathing heavily, though she wasn't running anywhere.

I killed Adamas?!

She had no memory of any such thing. The temples of her head throbbed in pain.

The heavily locked doors of her memory began to open with a thunderous roar.

The world was turning black as something oozed up from within her.

Scores of memories that she'd pushed down...

"Maybe you don't remember. It was when we first met."

She heard Adamas' voice as though from a great distance, her face blank as she listened.

When I first met Adamas...

Her head throbbed in agony, as though it was refusing to remember. Her body trembled.

"Yeah, back then you were kinda—"

She heard fragments of Adamas' voice. That was enough to stimulate it—the memory came flooding back to her. *My memory of Adamas.*

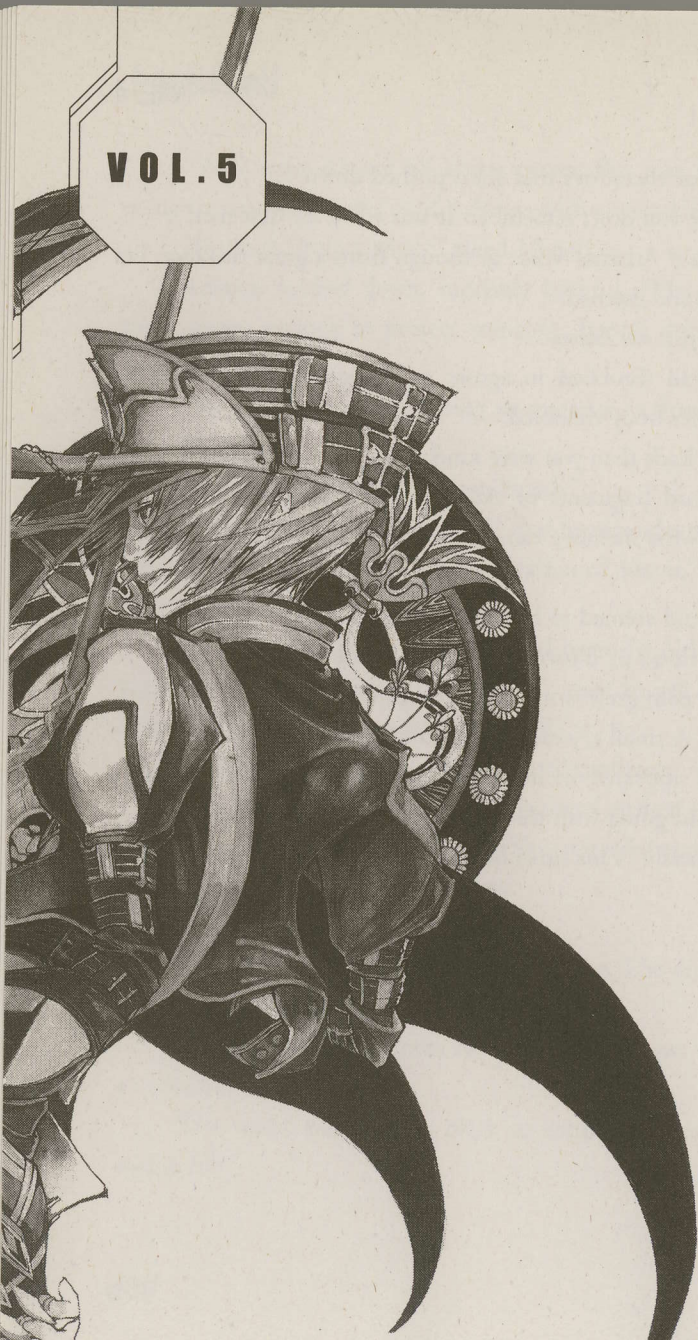
Her mind seemed to heat up as it tried—and failed—to keep up with the flood of information that assaulted it.

As the pain grew worse, her red lips twisted.

"Aah!" A small cry escaped from her mouth.

Cracks appeared in her mind, spreading out like a mesh, a keening sound going with them as the fractures compounded.

"Aaaaaaaah!" This time, Midori well and truly screamed.



VOL. 5

VOL. 5

The advancing darkness brought with it despair. Midori was wrapped in the dead of night, and it seemed endless. It was eternal.

It felt as though she had been hurled into the depths of space, though she knew she was still in the hospital room. The darkness aroused a primal fear in her. This desolation would not be conquered by mere understanding.

The clock said it was two in the morning.

Save for the occasional electronic beeps, the silence was complete. The silence magnified her loneliness.

Her body was corroded, eaten away by the darkness. She could feel her black-tainted body melting, dissolving into the world. Where did she end and the world begin?

The sensation of losing her human form was eerie.

The distinctions were no longer clear, and she could no longer be sure of the existence of her own body.

Face-up on the bed, she slowly held her right hand up. It moved very slowly, and even her eyes, by now well adjusted to the darkness, couldn't make it out.

A dull tone sounded in the room.

The brittle, fleeting sound suited Midori's prone form well. The tone sounded at regular intervals. It was irritating, grating on her nerves, exhausting her.

Without the support of these machines, she would not exist. She was not at all comfortable entrusting her life to them, but their position as irreplaceable partners was secure. Of course they weren't sucking her feelings out or anything. She was just there, with them.

Meanwhile, her body continued to deteriorate.

She never felt any signs of recovery, and while the cause of the mysterious illness remained unclear, it continued to weaken her.

Her body had become unable to support itself. Walking became difficult, and immediately after she'd started to find it frustrating, she was no longer able to walk at all. Her life had been confined to the hospital—now, it was confined to the bed.

The stress was no ordinary thing. Her mind had lost its equilibrium, and she would become angry only to immediately turn desperately depressed, swinging from one mood to another.

Her mind had weakened upon recognizing its sickness. As a result, she'd become more susceptible to the disease, and her

condition had worsened even more—it was a vicious circle. Before long, she'd been unable to rise, and was thus confined to bed.

What happened next hardly needed to be said. She had become increasingly sick, as though plunging down some steep hill.

Midori looked up at the ceiling, feeling powerless. The darkness ruled that place; there existed no glimmer of hope.

"There's no light at the end of *this* tunnel," she murmured, her voice hoarse.

She'd meant it to be funny, but there wasn't anything funny about it. It only made her more depressed. Her feelings no longer had any room for optimism. They were simply plunging down toward wherever they would land.

Death was stalking her, its scythe at the ready. And it was very, very close.

A shiver wracked her body. A chill washed over her, as though her feet had been dunked in ice water. She began to tremble.

It could've been the beginnings of a cold—or perhaps she was sensing the steady approach of despair and death. Either way, Midori was exhausted. She felt like someone had taken a rasp to her mind.

Why? Why is this happening?

Midori cursed her fate. She couldn't help wondering, *Why me?*

It was a pointless question, but she couldn't stop her herself from dwelling on it. She wanted to cry out at the unfairness of it all.

No, she *did* cry out.

"Aaaaaah!"

But her body did not answer her cry. The weak noise dissipated into the darkness and was gone. Midori was stunned—stunned at the revelation that it was now difficult to even express her feelings.

Her trembling worsened. It wasn't from cold. The issue she'd turned away from and tried not to think about as much as she could was now taking center stage.

I don't want to die.

She didn't even want to think about it, but she couldn't *not* think about, try as she might. The indescribable fear of it assailed her.

I don't want to die.

The more she wished it, the more she embraced hope, the thicker the dread of it became, and the more real.

The darkness seemed to roll in waves through the room. A pressure that seemed to have its own mass weighed on her chest, making it hard to breathe. Everything made her think of death.

Midori rolled to her side and bent at the waist, sitting there on the bed. She opened her mouth wide, gasping for air, like a fish out of water. *I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die.* She said it to herself over and over, as though she were chanting a spell.

It was her one thread of hope, over and over again, as she sought peace of mind.

But her fervent wish did not reach heaven. It became harder and harder to breathe, and soon she began to wheeze, a reedy whistle that sounded every time she exhaled.

Her consciousness was beginning to drift away.

Yet she managed to barely—just barely—hold that off. It was as though she'd been dropped in some infinite hell. It would have been so much easier to simply lose consciousness.

But in some corner of her mind, she knew she couldn't pass out. If she crossed that border, some part of her knew that there was no coming back.

Desperation on her face, Midori clung to consciousness as her hand frantically felt around above her head. She was sure the nurse call button was up there, somewhere.

She kept moving her hand, but all she found was air.

She kept feeling for it, but her body's reactions were becoming slow, unable to keep up with her panic—which was the only thing that was growing.

She gasped, faintly, so faintly that the sound would soon be gone. Was it pain? Or frustration? Something hot welled out of the corners of her eyes.

Why only me? Why...?

She couldn't breathe her last here—not here, not now. She had to live on, take glory in the rest of her life. It was never her plan to die alone and despairing in this living hell of a hospital room.

I don't want to die.

She gritted her teeth and reached out one last time. The fingertips of her right hand touched something. She grabbed hold of the button then pushed it with trembling fingers. Immediately thereafter, the voice of a nurse came through a speaker in the ceiling.

"Miss Shimomura? Is something the matter?"

Midori could not answer the nurse's inquiry. All that came from her mouth was a faint moan. She'd used the whole of her strength to push the button and had nothing left with which to reply. The thread of her anxiety snapped. Her consciousness began to speed away from reality.

I don't want to die.

In the midst of her distant consciousness, she prayed earnestly. It was too soon to despair. All she needed was a tiny chance. So long as the possibility wasn't completely zero, she could entrust some hope to the future.

Just as she was beginning to lose all sensory function, she became vaguely aware of the presence of a nurse.

The lights came on in the room, banishing the darkness. The nurse immediately ran to check Midori's condition. She called for assistance and then she started checking the support machines that surrounded Midori's bed.

Help me. Please.

Midori summoned the last of her strength and tried to speak, but all that came from her mouth were incoherent syllables.

Finally, her consciousness fell into the abyss.

She could hear a irregular beeping sound, faint, as though from a great distance.



Midori's scream echoed through the ancient city as twilight fell. It made the very air itself vibrate, reaching every corner of the harbor district.

Everyone froze in their tracks. No one moved, as though time itself had stopped.

Not a single bystander understood what had happened. The PCs all turned, their faces masks of dumb incomprehension, which in turn shifted to bewilderment.

A strange aura radiated out from Midori. It was totally unlike anything generated by *The World* in-game; it gave the impression of being some kind of bug.

They looked at Midori like she was some kind of garbage, then they stared at her with expressions on their faces like her very existence itself was offensive. They scattered. The only ones who remained were mindless NPCs and a very puzzled Adamas.

"Aaaaaaaaggh!" A piercing cry issued from Midori's mouth.

No longer in control of herself, she was free to react as she wanted. It was close to insanity. She scratched at her body and head. The impulse welled up from within her with a flood-like force, and her slender body became a mere thing to be used.

Adamas, I...

The pain felt like it was about to split her head. Holding her head in her hands, she desperately tried to keep her brain inside—it felt like it was trying to jump free of her body.

I killed Adamas?!

Am I grinding levels solo? Or am I...?

She looked around; they were in a cave. It was dark and visibility was poor. The only things that made it possible to walk without hitting obstacles were the plants that grew right in the bedrock. The petals of their flowers gave off a faint glow, illuminating the interior with a pale light.

It was quiet within the cave, and she couldn't make out any other PCs nearby. Aside from a smattering of NPCs near the transporter in the cave, there was nothing out of the ordinary.

Suddenly "Midori" started walking. "She" was like a ghost, and seemed to have no volition at all.

So what's going on? was Midori's honest reaction.

Ignoring Midori's confusion, "she" continued her silent walk.

Monsters were visible in an open area of the cave ahead. But "Midori" did not stop. It wasn't even clear that she noticed the creatures. She continued walking, not so much as flinching in the direction of her broadsword.

The monsters moved ahead, galloping toward "Midori" with a roar.

The next instant, a *whoosh* split the air.

That Midori had drawn her broadsword and split the beast right down the middle.

Yet Midori remained completely expressionless. She continued to walk, dragging her broadsword behind her. Midori's expression was unmoved as she continued farther into the cave. She was like a hag, wandering the land of the dead.

A commotion came from the open area ahead. Confused, Midori looked to see a PC who looked very much like a newbie cornered by a party of two other PCs—probably bandits that specialized in hitting n00bs.

The newbie was a Shadow Warlock of one of the beast tribes; he was curled up in a ball like a terrified puppy, desperately waiting for the nightmare to end.

The two PCs that were threatening the Shadow Warlock were Tribal Grapplers, menacing the poor Warlock with their fists raised high. They looked no different than a couple of schoolyard bullies to Midori.

The other Midori's body swayed crazily as she took one step, then two steps toward them.

The Shadow Warlock was the first to notice. He looked with eyes that begged for rescue, but "Midori" took no notice of them. She closed in, broadsword in hand.

"Who the hell are you?" The Tribal Grapplers regarded her with narrowed eyes.

"We're with Kestrel, lady. You know what that means?"

"Hate to think what'd happen if you go against us, y'know?"

They were the kind that used their reputation like a shield. Kestrel was a status symbol for them, and they were under the misapprehension that it made them stronger.

In lieu of a reply, "Midori" smiled a ghastly smile. Her visage froze all players present, as if the temperature had suddenly dropped.

What is that? Midori was astonished. There was no commonality between her and this other version of herself.

Except that lately, she'd been looking more and more like "her."

The palm of her right hand tingled, the sensation in the hilt of a sword while cutting a person down, it was still engraved on Midori's mind.

I smiled, back then. I know it. And she had enjoyed killing. *Just like the "me" in front of me.*

Just as Midori came to the realization, "Midori" swung the broadsword—and the heads of the two Tribal Grapplers went flying.

"Guh—AAAAAH!"

IThe horrified Shadow Warlock's face twisted in fear and he scrambled to get away. "Midori" followed after the Warlock, her now blood-streaked blade still in her hand.

Surely not? Midori had a bad feeling.

Death's shadow approached.

"Midori" raised her sword, her gazed fixed on the trembling Shadow Warlock, who was unable to so much as raise a finger of resistance against her. Her dark eyes froze him.

Wait! Midori's cry was meaningless—but she couldn't stop herself.

The sword dealt the Shadow Warlock a fatal wound as it came down. "Midori" wore an expression of joy as she listened to the death cry of the Shadow Warlock. There was no regret. Only that unbearable look on "her" face, as though this were somehow her function and purpose.

How can this be? Midori couldn't believe that this was her own past. No—she just didn't *want* to believe it.

She turned her back to the three bodies, closing her eyes as if to give them a moment of silence.

That is me. Her world shook with the realization.

The images disappeared with a burst of static, and the world was plunged into darkness. But then, like a TV channel that has been suddenly switched, the world's presence returned.

Midori was in a grassy area. Bathed in sunlight so warm it made her sleepy, it was a change from the previous hellscape. The ground was scattered with piles of corpses. They could even be seen off in the distance, the piles, and they were composed entirely of PCs, whose faces were, without exception, masks of agony.

And the one who had brought it about was a single Edge Punisher. "Midori" had mown down the gathered PCs with her broadsword. A strange sound came from her mouth. She was laughing.

Midori watched, aghast. *I was a PK.* She didn't want to admit it, but there it was, the truth.

Her memories of when she first alighted in *The World* spread out before her.

Broadsword firmly in hand. The sensation of cutting down a PC. These weren't feelings that had just appeared for no reason. Her body *remembered* it.

Her fight against Haseo, and Bordeaux's gambit—the experiences had shaken her.

"Midori" continued to slaughter the PCs that came after her, as if convinced that it was simply an Edge Punisher's duty to do so.

"She" was an avenging god, like a soulless NPC.

But what does that make me? I was controlling the PC called "Midori."

"Midori" continued her grim work. Her sword's blade was dyed red-black with the blood of PCs. There was no longer anyone who could stop her madness. She had been unopposed in her extermination of the PCs in the area, a grim smile on her face.

Midori cursed her counterpart under her breath as she glared at "Midori," who raged at the center of the carnage.

She wanted to end "Midori" by her own hand, if only she'd been able. If only to separate herself from her terrible past.

Just when "Midori" had nearly completed her killing spree, the world changed.

Every in-game object disappeared, and the landscape abruptly switched to wireframe graphics.

"Midori" continued to howl, unfazed by the sudden shift.

A single PC appeared high above. It appeared male, but it was different from any class in *The World*. The solidly built middle-age man was a GM—a Gamemaster, direct from the CC Corp.

He looked down on "Midori" calmly, arms folded. "While player-killing is permitted, doing it to this extent results in objections being raised," he said simply.

"Midori" said nothing.

"We suggest you find a different way to enjoy *The World*," said the GM evenly.

Her counterpart's only response was to grip her sword and look up with a fearless grin.

She can't possibly...

But "Midori" fixed the GM in her gaze—and leaped into the air, broadsword at the ready.



Adamas was at a loss. Midori continued to be half-mad with whatever it was that afflicted her, and he couldn't do a thing about it. He shouted at her and he shook her, but nothing had any result. It was though her mind was simply not there.

He continued to call out to her.

Midori's breakdown—there was a chance it had been triggered by something he'd said. He felt responsible. But more than that, he was plain worried about her.

But why this?

A storm of confusion whirled in Adamas' mind.

Even as he continued to call out to Midori, he thought back on his own words. There had to be some clue there, something he could use to help her. Yet he could think of nothing that stood out.

He sifted through his memory, as quickly and carefully as he could.

The conclusion was soon clear. *I feel like I was just making small talk.*

That was simply the reality of it.

.hack//Cell

He distinctly remembered talking about wanting to become strong enough to protect Midori. Remembering it made him blush with his entire body, but it was hard to imagine that statement having such an effect on Midori.

He probed deeper into his memory: *"Plus I don't want to get killed by you again."*

The words came back to him with terrible force. *That's it. Right after I said that, Midori...* Adamas frantically considered this as he held the struggling girl. *That was the trigger? But, why?*

The questions only increased.

That was hardly a clue, but it obviously contained some truth.

Adamas thought back to the first time he'd met Midori—a despair-filled milieu that awaited him...

Adamas had been a player in *The World* for a month when he read the post on the public BBS: Suppression Squad Forming Up: Members Wanted!

His eyes had stopped at the new thread. On the boards that were filled with countless posts, this one somehow stuck out.

There wasn't any particular reason why. He'd simply gotten used to the game and was just starting to think he'd like to participate in some in-game events.

"Perfect timing."

Adamas assumed it was one of the monster-fighting parties that were quite common, but as he looked at the post he soon realized he'd been mistaken.

SUPPRESSION SQUAD CONTACT: SAKAKI

I AM SAKAKI. THE CAPTAIN OF MOON TREE'S SECOND DIVISION.

AS I'M SURE YOU'RE ALL AWARE, A MYSTERIOUS PK HAS BEEN CONDUCTING SLAUGHTER ON A LARGE SCALE.

FROM ITS UNCOMMON STRENGTH, IT'S SAFE TO ASSUME IT'S USING SOME KIND OF EXPLOIT OR CHEAT.

IF IT CONTINUES, THE SYSTEM OF THE WORLD MAY BE IN DANGER.

THE LEADERSHIP OF MOON TREE ASKS FOR YOUR COOPERATION.

THOSE YOU ARE WITH US, PLEASE SPEAK UP. THAT IS ALL.

Adamas felt real fear upon reading Sakaki's message.

He was well aware of just how fearsome PKs could be. He'd had many bitter experiences himself. But even so, he couldn't help but feel that organizing a suppression squad and trying to enforce order was going too far, even if the PK was using an exploit. It was painfully obvious to Adamas that such action would lead only to further grudges, suffering, and sadness.

Still, he sympathized with anyone who found themselves attacked by a large group. It was a mark carried by anyone who'd been maliciously persecuted.

Even when the physical wound healed, the lingering effects cast a dark pall over the heart that remained long afterward.

The number of participants in the suppression squad was climbing. Adamas decided he would join them without even checking the details, and he posted his decision to the board.

He had no intention of trying to get the problem PK to reflect on what he or she had done. So although Adamas was totally unqualified to participate, as long as he kept his mouth shut, nobody would know. Truth be told, he was more interested in seeing the suppression squad than the PK.

The schedule advanced under Sakaki's direction. Adamas was rather low-level, so he was not allowed to fight on the front lines and was given a support role instead.

That was just what he'd wanted. He'd had no intention of fighting, anyway.

The PK suppression squad moved out a week after Adamas voiced his participation on the board.

The reason everything went so smoothly was entirely thanks to Sakaki's leadership ability—and the network he was connected to via Moon Tree was also quite large. Being able to use such a resource as he wished allowed him to easily gather information on his opponents.

There were twenty PCs in the suppression squad. It would be more than enough to take on a single PK.

Adamas couldn't imagine exactly how powerful the arrayed PCs would be, but he was sure of one thing—they couldn't possibly lose.

They used the Chaos Gate at Mac Anu to transport themselves to a grassy field. It was dark, and rain was beating down. Thin, ash-grey clouds passed overhead with startling speed, occasionally punctuated by flashes of lightning and thunder, as if to suit the scene that was about to begin.

Adamas furrowed his brow.

Even if the heavens parted and the rain poured, it couldn't affect him in the real world. But the visual information he took in had a very real effect on his mind. The CC Corp had no doubt designed the area with that in mind.

I've got a bad feeling about this.

There was the weather, yes—but the suppression squad itself was giving off a kind of grim aura that Adamas found oppressive.

It might have been a make-believe world, but they were still going to kill somebody. Even imagining what the rest of the squad was thinking darkened Adamas' mind.

At Sakaki's signal, they began to move. Every piece of the plan had been decided well in advance, so there was no chatter; the regular sound of footfalls as they walked was the only noise.

At the head of the group was Sakaki—he stopped. The squad behind him halted smartly, like a military marching column.

The rain was getting worse. The sound washed out any other noise, which lent the surroundings a queer stillness.

Sakaki pointed ahead. The squad all looked.

It's so dark. Adamas narrowed his eyes, but all he saw was darkness.

.hack//Cell

Just then, the night sky was illuminated by a monstrous bolt of lightning. For an instant, the whole region was filled with a stark white light.

"That's..." Adamas murmured in spite of himself.

Ahead of them was a lone PC. For an instant, she was bathed in light as she stood there, the rain pounding down on her. Her back was turned, obscuring her features, but it was clear from her long hair and flowing blue dress that she was female. Her right hand held a giant broadsword; the bodies of several PCs were at her feet.

She's the PK we're after?! Adamas felt a distinct unease.

He'd known that the PK in question was a female Edge Punisher, but the form he saw before him was far removed from what he'd imagined. It seemed impossible that the source of so much slaughter was so... *lovely*. Adamas lost sight of the squad's objective, his gaze stolen by her.

She seemed to have noticed them. She turned slowly, her blue eyes taking in the squad.

Adamas' heart froze.

He'd rather have been stared at by a demon—at least a demon would have some recognizable emotion on its face. But *her* face was utterly blank, a mask of non-feeling, and more frightening by far than any demon.

Adamas realized he'd broken out in a cold sweat, but he couldn't look away from her. The vivid terror had transfixed him.

The veteran PCs were the same. They backed away at the nameless fear.



She was the first to move.

Sakaki's initiative was lost.

They still had overwhelming numbers. There was always the possibility that they could subdue her without crossing blades. That would've been the smartest course of action, and it was certainly what Adamas was hoping for... but it was naive.

She slashed at them without expression or hesitation. Sakaki didn't even have time to shout a single order.

"Shi—" he shouted as he drew his blade to meet Midori's. That was signal enough.

The squad moved immediately, but with no thought of the plan they'd so carefully prepared. Each member took their own action.

This is a disaster.

The situation was turning out worse than Adamas would've ever imagined.

A group of people ganging up on a single person... It was no different than the bullying that happened in the real world. In the end, she would suffer wounds that would not heal.

He couldn't just stand by and watch it happen. He couldn't—and yet pathetically, he didn't move. He thought of his situation in the real world and was unable to act.

Damn it!

It was absurd to think he could save her, but he had to do something.

Yet he couldn't move in response to that feeling. His character stood stock still.

Adamas cursed himself—he couldn't even bluff his way through a video game.

Is power everything in The World? He was a weakling—both in reality and fantasy. *I want power. If I only had power, everything would be fine.*

The PK and the suppression squad charged each other head-on. They thought the battle would be decided in but a moment—but it did not go so smoothly.

She closed in with her broadsword, swinging it horizontally with all her strength, unleashing ferocious energy.

The advancing squad gritted their teeth as the shockwave hit them, their discipline destroyed in the face of the blast. It was the prelude to their destruction.

Her power was beyond Adamas' imagining. It was far outside the norm, incredible even if she were using some kind of exploit. Her destructive force made her a literal one-woman army, and she easily repelled the blows that came from the squad.

Adamas gasped. "Incredible." He couldn't suppress his awe at the girl's ability. He found himself even moved by it.

"Tch!" spat Sakaki as he swung his blade. The situation was obvious to any observer, and it was wreaking havoc with the morale of the remaining PCs, who were becoming more disorganized by the second.

"Ugh. Retreat and regroup!" shouted Sakaki, but the members of the squad had already started to scatter.

It happened in an instant. Adamas realized that he had been late in escaping, that only he remained—it was just him and the PK, now.

He didn't try to run, instead continuing to look at her as she stood there in the rain. He kept watching her, as though it was somehow his duty to do so.

She showed no bloodlust. Perhaps because of that, he was unafraid. Of course, she'd showed no emotion from the beginning—but still.

Suddenly, she looked at him. She was still spattered with her victims' blood, still standing in the rain as if to wash it off.

She readied her weapon and began to walk toward him lazily.

Wordlessly she closed in on him, ignoring the mud she walked through.

I think she's going to kill me.

It was strange how objectively he could watch this; Adamas smiled in spite of himself. He had no fear of death.

She stood before him, her cold gaze boring into him. He couldn't begin to imagine what she was thinking.

"Um, so..." Adamas managed to stammer. He was not a conversationalist at the best of times, and it was worse when talking to a girl. It was only his genuine interest in her that allowed him to try to engage her.

Why does she keep killing PCs?

There had to be some meaning behind it, and Adamas mused that it was his desire to know that helped him conquer his cowardice.

"I'm Adamas. What's your name?"

She gave no answer.

Adamas stood there, continuing with his questions. "So, why do you keep killing PCs? When did you start? Did someone PK you? Or..."

Her expression did not change.

She did, however, raise her broadsword high.

"Um, I..." Adamas said nothing further.

She swung her sword around then plunged it deep into his chest.

Adamas choked then collapsed to the ground.



"Aaaaaaagh!"

The sound of her own screaming seemed to bring Midori back to herself.

Her throat was sore, perhaps from all the shouting, and the rush of information that had just washed over her made her brain feel like it was overheated.

The memories of the past that she'd forcibly sealed away had returned to Midori with undeniable clarity.

The sheer frustration of it made her want to disappear. *Why would I forget something so important?*

Her head throbbed with pain, as though countless connections in her mind had burned out entirely. Midori cringed, holding herself as she sank to the floor.

I know. I know I did it, back then. Midori looked down to the palm of her right hand. *Yes. I know I did lift my hand against Adamas, that day.*

Now that the memory had returned, she could feel the very sensation, the feeling of her blade cleaving flesh still resonating in the palm of her hand.

But why? Why was I a PK? The question flashed through mind with violent speed.

"Midori? Are you okay?"

She looked up, her eyes meeting a very worried-looking Adamas.

"I..." she answered, listless, her head drooping down. She couldn't bear to look him in the eye.

"Midori, do you—wait, do you not remember?"

"I..."

She had no idea what was going on in her own head. It was as though she was hallucinating these memories, which had to belong to someone else. *What was I thinking, killing so many PCs without a single hesitation? What was I trying to do?*

Midori wanted to know what she had been thinking to kill those random PCs—and Adamas. And now she could remember. *I wasn't thinking anything.*

She had killed them because they were *there*. That was all. It was like instinct.

Yet Midori instantly rejected that. Only animals killed unthinkingly. It was the ability to have feelings and hold one's instincts in check that made one human.

So what am I? She searched her mind frantically.

This was a video game. There wasn't anything like instinct in it to begin with.

Then that makes me a...

A keen pain stabbed through Midori as she neared the answer. Her face distorted and a wail escaped her mouth as she endured the nightmare.

"Do you remember when we first met?"

"Huh?" Midori's mind didn't catch up to the sudden question at first, but when she grasped it, she cocked her head curiously.

"It was like your mind wasn't here. I always thought you were a really strange player."

"My mind... wasn't here?"

Adamas got down on one knee beside the ruminating Midori and leaned over. "Don't you remember?"

Midori nodded her head.

"I remember," she said. "I remember when I met you, and what happened before that, too." The memories definitely existed. But there were many questions that surrounded them. "I feel like I learned a lot from you, Adamas," she said lightly.

Once she met Adamas, she had cast off her old self like dry skin.

"Well, I wasn't trying to teach you anything, really. I just, y'know, went to see you every day."

It wasn't modesty, from Adamas—it was the truth.

He had showed up in front of Midori every day, always making pointless small talk—about himself, about *The World*, and about his plans for those things. He talked about *Online Jack*, the strange TV show. He talked about anything.

And by hearing the topics repeated over and over, Midori had, little by little, learned how to live in *The World*. But that was a strange story in and of itself.

It was filled with contradictions.

It felt like the more she looked, the more tears appeared in the tale, each one bringing a new inconsistency.

Midori gasped at the terrible pain that tried to force the memories away. Her body was covered in a cold sweat. It was strangely upsetting that she didn't just lose consciousness.

"Do you remember saying you'd never swing your sword again?"

"I remember."

"And you remember being a professional victim?"

"I remember."

"You said something about reducing the amount of PKing happening by making yourself a target, right?"

Midori nodded her head, which was still in pain as she held it between her hands.

I'd never swing a sword again, eh?

With that oath, she'd put an adamantite lock on the great doors that sealed her past away—strong enough that they might never be opened again. But Midori had forgotten—forgotten even that she had sworn an oath never to take her Dragonblossom in hand again.

"What should I do?!" she asked herself in desperation. She knew despair was creeping up on her.

The pain in her head showed no sign of abating.

"A lot of stuff has happened really quickly, so you've got to be tired. Maybe you should just take it easy for the rest of the day," said Adamas reasonably.

Midori agreed; calling it a day sounded like a good idea. She felt like getting away from *The World* for a bit would put her on the path to some resolution.

"I'm heading home," said Midori, listless as she slowly stood.

"Midori, are you all right?!"

"I'll manage." Midori forced herself to smile so as not to worry Adamas—but it was such an effort that it wound up looking even more unnatural.

She began to walk, tottering unsteadily as if drunk. She couldn't really feel her feet, which made it seem like she were floating—it was very much like her mind, at the moment.

Midori stopped before she had gotten more than a few steps and looked back. She felt a sadness as though her very heart were being deserted.

The cause was obvious.

What was my goal when I joined The World?

Compelled by a need to know, she bore the pain yet again and searched her memory, soon arriving at a conclusion. *I have no memory of that!* Midori was stunned. *That can't be right.*

Her sealed memories had already come boiling up and been exposed to burning daylight. She had just come to terms with that. But the memory she now tried to find was gone.

.hack//Cell

Her memories from before she came to *The World*—somehow they'd been shed with incredible completeness. She couldn't travel back into those memories. They didn't exist.

That can't be.

Midori was impatient as she again concentrated on calmly pulling the memory back to herself. Any memory would do. If she could recover even a hint of one, it would be enough to prove her own existence.

But if she couldn't, it would upend all proof that she existed.

Her eyes bloodshot, Midori continued to salvage her own recollection. She *had* to exist.

But there was not so much as a shadow of such a memory. No matter where she looked or how far she dredged, there was nothing.

Her heart pounded; Midori could feel the blood racing through her body.

"Who... who...?" Midori whimpered in a tiny, barely audible voice, holding her head between her hands.

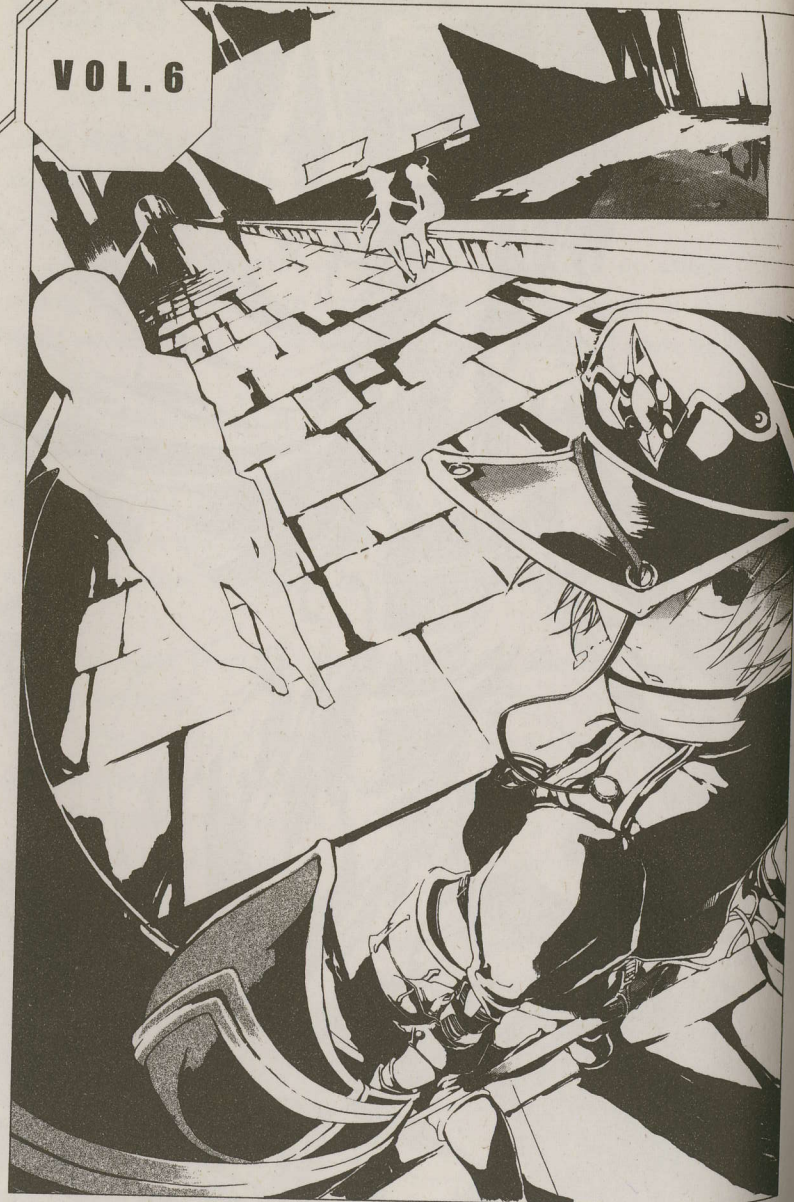
The anxiety bloomed in her chest, infecting her entire body with terrible speed. For the exhausted, shattered girl, it was the final blow.

Midori's world began to crumble. A fatal fissure split her mind.

"Who... am I?"



VOL. 6



VOL. 6

Was she alive, or was she dead? Everything was vague; everything was uncertain. She felt oriented somewhere between dream and reality. *I might have been dozing.*

Midori realized it with a start. She was bathed in the soft afternoon sunlight, her head down on her desk as she slept. It was bliss.

She opened her eyes and sat up; it felt like she was back in her own room... Yet at the same time, she realized that couldn't be. In the real world, she was collapsed on a hospital bed, connected to countless machines. If she'd had the strength to overcome the force of gravity on her eyelids, surely all that would greet her would be the same world of despair. She did not have the courage to face it.

This dream world was a place that Midori had prepared for herself—a place free of the pain that suffused the real world, a place she could escape to.

She hadn't given into despair. It was precisely *because* she didn't want to lose hope that she needed this place.

Suddenly another familiar scene came into view—the ancient city of Mac Anu. It was strange to be imagining an already imaginary place, yet the vividness of it was almost overwhelming as the view stretched out before her.

The city was filled with people who were dressed in unfamiliar clothes; they went unhurriedly about their business. Two people stood out on one side of the plaza—it was Midori and Kaho. They wore their school uniforms, gazing out at the red-painted city that was illuminated by the setting sun.

"So if I were to play, what class should I use?" Midori looked to Kaho, who stood next to her.

"Hmm, good question." Kaho hemmed in thought but seemed to come to a quick conclusion and continued confidently. "You seem like the type who'd like swinging a sword around, so what about an Edge Punisher?"

"An Edge Punisher?"

"Basically you get a giant sword and you can slice the living daylights out of enemies," said Kaho, pantomiming a big sword swing. Of course, that simple explanation fell short of conveying the full truth. "You've gotta get better quick and buy your own M2D and terminal, then try making a real character. That'd be the best!"

"Kaho, isn't this kind of a pain?"

"Nope."

The laughter of the two girls echoed across the city.

At length, the curtain of night descended over the city, and the scene faded out.

The place that Midori had prepared to escape from her own terrible reality was *The World*. The time she had spent there had been brief, but it had left a deep impression on her mind.

So that's why hospital patients get so into The World. Now that she was so weak she could hardly move, Midori understood their reasoning. They could escape from reality and keep their mind balanced.

Maybe that's what *The World* existed for—to escape cruel reality.

There, you were utterly free. Released from the prison of the body, you could glory in life, even glimpse paradise. Midori certainly felt as much.

Yet a sudden dark shadow appeared. Her mind might be saved by this change in thinking—but if she lost her body, she lost everything.

This could all be a pointless struggle.

Her body was rotting because of the demon sickness; she was assaulted by terrible pain. It would be surprising if she were to live through it, truth be told.

It was what Midori felt, and surely the nurses that checked in on her had similar thoughts. She didn't feel as though she could put much hope in modern medicine, but she essentially had no choice but to cling to that tiny thread.

I don't want to die.

Midori's consciousness wavered uncertainly as she wished with all her might.

Her senses began to return to her in a strange rush, as though she were falling; at the same time, she was assaulted with an intense weariness.

No.

She felt as though she were falling from paradise—and as she fell, she couldn't escape coming face-to-face with the reality she so loathed.

It was the face of despair. That despair extinguished all hope, weakening her life force. It was why she had to have another world to escape to.

Midori resisted it with everything she had, but the despair closed in, implacable.

The sinews of her body began to ache, as though every muscle was suddenly sore. The pain dragged her consciousness back to the real world.

"Ugh," she groaned quietly.

She opened her tightly shut eyelids, confirming vaguely the existence of the white ceiling above her. Her body did not move. She could only move her fingers and eyes, and even then, only with effort.

All she could be sure of in this constrained world was the white brightness of ceiling. And that was all.

Inorganic beeping noises echoed through the empty world. They came from the many machines that were attached to Midori's body—the proof that she was still alive.

Can this even be called living?

It wasn't living—it was being kept alive. If even one of those countless machines failed, Midori's life would immediately be in danger. *Why—why did this happen?*

She started to curse aloud at her situation, but her mouth was plugged up with various tubes, and she couldn't even do that. The humiliation and frustration made her want to do something, *anything.*

To bring herself out of the crushing cage of feelings, Midori tried to concentrate on other things—but nothing came easily to mind, and soon her ears picked up on the sound of multiple footsteps approaching.

Probably nurses, Midori thought.

She couldn't move, but her sense of hearing seemed to have gotten keener as if to compensate for that.

Midori strained to hear, and though it was very faint, she was able to catch the voices of two women as they conversed.

"What's Miss Shimomura's condition?"

"It's not very promising. She keeps getting worse, and we still don't know why."

"Oh. I know it's hard, but hang in there, okay? Also, Nanao—how is Miss Shino doing?"

"Same as always, I guess. Still in a deep coma."

"I see."

"Her condition's stable so she doesn't need much care, but... they're both so young."

The two nurses were talking in hushed voices.

Someone with a sickness like mine...?

It gave Midori a bit of courage. She couldn't hope to meet the other girl in this condition, but maybe someday. The idea was extremely calming to Midori.

She smiled and closed her eyes. *I wonder if I actually smiled.*

In her mind, at least, Midori grinned sardonically at the very question. The pain in her head seemed to escape into the air, as if a hole had been drilled into her head to ease the pressure.

Midori opened her eyes, which brimmed with tears, and uttered a voiceless moan.

The world before her began to grow misty, her consciousness becoming turbid.

One of the machines that surrounded her began to emit a high-pitched alarm, as if it couldn't stand to watch her deteriorate any further.

Immediately, Midori heard a nurse burst into the room and give a cry of dismay, but she could no longer understand what the nurse was saying.

Her consciousness was sinking.

Endlessly, endlessly...

Finally, the world sank into darkness, and her mind began to dissolve into the black. With her fading consciousness, she had but one fervent wish.

When I wake up, I hope I...

The thought vanished into the inky black.



The fissure in Midori's mind widened. With a high-pitched keen, it rapidly spread through her body, which began to collapse. Midori pushed back in an effort to stave it off, but she had no success. Fragments of her mind were falling away like grains of sand through her fingers.

"I..." Midori held her head in her hands, cringing. The pain in her head was so severe that she was afraid it would split—and that pain was tiny compared with the wounds in her mind.

"Who *am* I?" she murmured, as her gaze wandered around in search of salvation.

The area was cloudy with rising steam. The ocean sparkled as it reflected the setting sun. It was the world she knew.

Yet the scenery made her uneasy. It was distorted now, as though she were viewing it through a fisheye lens. There was static, and the picture cut out occasionally. She didn't know if it was a connection problem, or if her troubled mind was showing her these things. It was enough to make her dizzy. The ground underneath her feet seemed to roll crazily; for a moment, she even felt seasick.

She listed forward, trying to summon the strength to right herself. Midori braced herself to slam into the ground.

"Midori, are you all right?!" Adamas ran up to her and supported her slight body. "Are you sure you feel okay? You're acting really weird today, Midori," said Adamas as he gave voice to his concern.

I wonder if I'm sick.

Maybe the dizziness and headache that she felt even now were some kind of physical malady? She sought respite for her mind and body—both were exhausted to the point that it would be hardly surprising if she passed out.

"Maybe you should just log-out for today," she heard Adamas say, his voice full of kindness. But the voice was hard to make out—it was like she had earplugs in.

"Adamas," Midori whispered in a quiet voice. "Who... who am I?"

"Who are you? You're Midori, of course," he answered, confused.

His answer was not enough to persuade her. It would've been much more apt if she'd simply been asked, "Who *are* you?"

What was she?

Midori's face was a mask of anguish.

Her memories were missing fundamental pieces of information.

Name, age, sex, occupation, residence, if she were a Japanese citizen, her ID number—she could remember none of these things. Taken from the national resident registry network, they were the identifying pieces of information that a person needed to function in society. If she couldn't remember those, she had no way to prove her own existence.

Midori hastily started an ID search—but without those vital pieces of information on hand, she ran into an immediate roadblock. *My name...?*

She sifted through the shattered fragments of her mind for something, anything—but no matter how she looked, she found nothing.

"I need you to tell me," said Midori, overcoming the pain and turning to Adamas.

"Tell you what?"

"Anything you know about me. Anything at all."

"Hm, I dunno, this is kinda sudden." Adamas furrowed his brow, deep in thought.

"*Anything*," said Midori, summoning her strength to lean lightly into Adamas, looking him straight in the eyes with a serious expression. "I don't care what it is. If you know it, I want to know it."

"Hmm." Adamas folded his arms and thought hard for a moment. "So, like, that you're an Edge Punisher and a professional victim?"

"Yeah," Midori nodded, urging him to go on.

"Let's see, what else..." Adamas got that far then trailed off. "H-hang on, it's just slipped my mind, is all."

I see how it is. If she couldn't even remember these things herself, how would other people know?

She'd spent a long time with Adamas, but their conversations had been limited to talking about *The World*. They'd never touched on anything that connected to their individual lives. Not even a word. There had never been any need—and evidently she'd never had the memories to begin with.

"The..."

"Huh?"

"The memories of my real life..." Midori murmured, dazedly.

She had a better-than-average understanding of *The World*. Its conventions, its systems, its inhabitants, even its secrets and its core structure—things that not many people knew about but that appeared on exploit sites... these were within Midori's knowledge.

She knew about real-world events, too. Most of her understanding came from News Capture, the online news service, but she knew enough to be able to guess at a story's truth or falsehood.

It was enough knowledge to get along. But the critical details—her own personal memories—she could not produce a single one. It was as if at some point they had been simply wiped away.

What did I do before I was a PK?

Her memories of being a PK were vague, but before that was a complete blank.

Midori felt as if the blood had drained from her body. Only with great effort did she overcome the lightheadedness that washed over her and look to Adamas.

"I can't. I can't remember my real life." Her voice sounded so desolate, even she could tell. "It's gone. I should have those memories, but I..." She slumped, looking down.

"Surely at least your name—"

Midori held her hand up to stop Adamas' talking, shaking her head sadly.

"That can't be." Adamas fell speechless.

It was an understandable reaction. Midori couldn't believe it herself, so there was no way another person could understand.

She realized that the harbor district had regained some of its usual liveliness—apart from the occasional PCs that directed their curious gazes to her, of course.

"I've heard stories of people that have lost consciousness while playing in *The World*, so maybe it's had some kind of bad effect on you, too," Adamas ventured.

Midori had heard of such incidents, as well. Some people had collapsed from exhaustion, and there were even some who had become so distraught over a game event that they had committed suicide. There were also incidents of people slipping into comas while wearing M2Ds—the stories had been flogged to death on News Capture, so Midori was quite familiar with them.

"So there's a possibility you've just played too much and it's caused you some temporary amnesia, is all," said Adamas, his voice full of confidence.

I guess that is a possibility.

She acknowledged the plausibility of the idea, but her heart was unmoved. Far from it, she had stepped into an even darker mist than before. It felt to her like there was something fundamentally wrong with Adamas' explanation.

That she was confused was inarguable. But she couldn't believe that her memory had simply become temporarily confused. It was strange that *only* her memories of her real-world life were gone, and that only her memories of *The World* remained.

When she put the question to Adamas, his face became severe, and he fell into silence. Midori was also quiet; an air of gloom settled around the pair.

Adamas was the one who broke the silence: "I'm not a doctor so I don't really know about that stuff, but, you definitely exist, Midori. I mean, c'mon, we were gonna meet in the real world. And you saw me in front of the CC Corp building. So that means—"

"It's proof that I exist."

"Right, exactly." Adamas nodded, a satisfied expression on his face.

Midori nodded meekly in response. She didn't have a good reason to dispute this, but a piece of doubt remained in her heart. *I wonder if that's really true.*

She couldn't calm herself in the face of the vague unease she felt. But there were no other explanations that she could accept, so she reluctantly consented to this one.

Midori sighed deeply. The strength drained from her body, every muscle relaxing—she almost collapsed on the spot.

Guess I'm over-thinking it.

It was probably just as Adamas said. She would take off the M2D, calm down, and look around to see the real world spreading out before her.

Whether or not she had simply become over-agitated and had temporarily forgotten herself, logging out would force her back into reality. If she didn't, more inconsistencies would start to appear on each side, and a breakdown would be inevitable.

Midori gave her tottering body a strict reprimand as she forced herself to her feet.

"Sorry. I *am* pretty tired."

That was the final conclusion she'd come to. She would leave *The World* and return to reality. It was the best option she could come up with.

She'd taken a roundabout path to get there, and the emotional toll had been high, but coming up with some kind of plan made her feel better. Before making any kind of decisions, she needed to return to the real world and take back her own identity.

"So, I'm logging out," Midori informed Adamas.

Adamas acknowledged it without a moment's hesitation. "Send me some e-mail when you feel better."

"Will do." Midori nodded and walked toward the transporter.

Adamas followed her. "I'm not worried about you, Midori—it's you, after all."

"I'll be fine," Midori declared bravely. She stopped, turning to face Adamas again.

He nodded, uncertainty written all over his face.

She exhaled. "If I take the M2D off, I can return to the real world. There's no need to log-out. That's right, isn't it?"

"I guess so. I mean, if you leave the game, the M2D comes off and all."

"Right."

"But, I mean, why would you even ask that?" Adamas wanted to know.

It was an absurd topic—not something that could be discussed with a straight face. “Wait, just—wait,” said Midori, closing her eyes. She mustered her courage and brought her right hand up, taking hold of the M2D. No.

“This—” Midori opened her eyes and gulped.

It should have been impossible. She could not touch the M2D that was supposedly on her head.

That wasn’t all. She couldn’t even be sure that she was even really *wearing* an M2D. There was likewise no sensation of manipulating a terminal. It was like she’d just entered *The World* with nothing more than the clothes on her back.

Her heart pounded wildly in her chest. Her expression became stiff, and her body began to tingle as she hyperventilated.

“Midori?!” Adamas cried, realizing that Midori was in severe distress—but she could not answer.

Why can’t I take off my M2D? Why?!

It didn’t make any sense.

To begin with, there was no way the M2D couldn’t be removed—the situation simply couldn’t arise. The CC Corp had never envisaged such a case design, and there was no mention of anything like that happening in the tech support pages for *The World*.

Her chest rose and fell with her breath. Her heart was racing with such intensity that she was sure the sound of its frantic beats was audible to other people.

A chill ran down her spine, and hairs stood up all over her body. She felt ill, and the contents of her stomach seemed ready to come back up.

Nausea? She tilted her head, suddenly curious. *What did I eat today?*

She didn’t even have to think about it. There were no such memories. That wasn’t the only sudden uncertainty, either.

How did I get to the CC Corp building?

She followed the memory that played back like a movie before her, but it only went as far back as arriving at the train station. Had she walked to the station? Had she taken a train? Her memory had her starting at the station, with no sense of the process that had gotten her there. She couldn’t even remember where her house was.

Why? Why? The question felt exactly like the doubts she had about her own real life. It was like all of her memories before a certain point were entirely gone.

Her mind was a confused whirl. She didn’t understand a single thing about herself. Battered by the realization, she felt on the cusp of losing her very sanity.

“Ah.” Midori collapsed to her knees; her vision dimmed and her consciousness clouded.

The reality she’d believed in and never doubted was now crumbling audibly around her. She had no idea who or what she was. She couldn’t even be sure of her own existence, which seemed desperately tenuous and inescapably illusory.

Adamas was shouting into her ear, but even that sound seemed faint and distant. She couldn’t understand what he was saying.

Midori concentrated as hard as she could in order to speak. “I’m sorry. I’m disconnecting,” she said, wringing the words out of herself as she started to log-out.

Adamas' voice reached her from behind, but she didn't have enough energy to stay any longer.

The desktop appeared before her, but no sooner had it done so than Midori quit out of the OS. The world was plunged instantly into darkness, and her consciousness began to fade at the same time.

Who... am I?

The question floated to the surface of her mind as it emptied.

Feeling desperately uneasy at the lack of any sensation of using a controller or terminal, her consciousness faded to black.



The harbor district was lively, as though nothing had happened, filled with the pleasant exchanges of the many PCs that were there. Adamas was the only one who stood dumbly, like a mindless NPC.

He had no idea what had just happened. It had lacked a sense of reality, like something from a dream. Dazed, he took first one step, then another, finally dropping his gaze to the spot where Midori had disappeared.

"What... what just happened?"

He brushed his hand against the ground, but there was nothing there—no lingering aura, no trace of her. He felt nothing from the ground. *Hardly surprising, I guess.*

Adamas stood and selected the user status tool from the system menu. Midori was listed as "offline," so he at least knew she was not currently connected to *The World*.

That wasn't a normal disconnect, though.

It had been closer to a forced drop of the connection. Of course, disconnects like that were far from rare. But given Midori's mental state, Adamas had to wonder if there was more to it than that. *I hope she's all right.*

The uncertainty in his heart would not be easily dismissed. He wanted to be sure of her safety but had not a single piece of information about her real life. *I really wish I would've asked her at some point.*

He regretted not knowing, but there was no way he could've anticipated this outcome. Adamas thought on it for a while, then nodded once to himself and headed for the transporter.



Midori floated in the darkness, her body suffused with it. Silence surrounded her, swallowing even the sound of her own breath. She heard no heartbeat, nor the rustle of any clothing. Her sense of hearing might as well have been gone.

Instead of sound, countless particles of light surrounded her. They moved at the speed of light, passing through Midori's body one after another, as though she'd been tossed into the middle of a meteor shower.

Midori was supine as she watched the specks of light come and go.

She wasn't actually seeing any light. Without capturing any light, her pupils were simply opening and closing with unnatural rapidity. Those eyes reflected nothing, and her heart felt nothing. It was like being asleep.

How much time passed while she lay there? After what felt like an eternity, she finally stirred, stretching out her hand to grasp at one of the specks of light.

The moment her fingertip touched it, a jolt of what felt like electricity ran through her body. Simultaneously, a profound rush of information washed into her, etching itself onto her mind. Lines of zeros and ones swirled through her head, resolving themselves into something with meaning.

It was *The World* and the pieces of information that surrounded it. What she had touched were the actions of a user at their desktop, and the responses of the server to those actions.

She saw what menu items they chose, what actions they took—and the server's responses to each query.

Midori's consciousness was forced awake by the tremendous flow of information.

"Where am I?!" Midori sat up and moved her gaze over the surrounding environment. She had never seen it before. Yet at the same time, it felt strangely comfortable, like she was relaxing in her room. Perhaps that was why, despite the strange world that lay before her, she felt no particular unease.

What's going on here? Midori stood without really having a sense of where the ground was, and she turned a full circle, taking in the entire scene. She felt no gravity. Instead, she seemed to float, weightless.

She stretched her hand out toward the specks of light that seemed to flow in from somewhere far away, touching up a few at random. Each time she did so, a new, vivid image burned itself on her retinas. They were all very familiar.

News, bulletin boards, e-mail, and *The World*—she ran rapidly through the various kinds of information. She was not controlling it, though. At this moment, it was the actions of other users connected to the network that spread out before her.

"If so, then this is all..."

The light-specks sped by. They could be thought of as the data being transmitted over the network. Which meant Midori was essentially in the middle of the highway, watching the cars—the network data—drive past.

It was no effort at all for her to touch said data, but what she was doing could be thought of as hacking—hacking that required no hardware.

Understanding of the situation she was in came gradually. But for each aspect she understood, another question arose.

Why am I here? That was the fundamental question.

Midori had logged out of *The World* and should have awoken to reality. But what she saw was not the CC Corp building, nor the pedestrians walking around in front of it. This place was just as imaginary as *The World*.

She had meant to escape the game but was apparently unable to leave the 'net. That apparent fact stirred up a profound confusion in Midori.

"I can't go back... to reality."

It was what she had feared most of all. The realization came with simultaneous feelings of irritation and loneliness. Eventually, a single doubt appeared in her mind—along with an instinctual sense of alarm.

You mustn't touch that.

The poisonous, red light lit up in her mind, blinking as if to emphasize its own existence. She hesitated even to approach it, but it also seemed impossible to avoid.

By averting her gaze, perhaps she could preserve her own peace of mind for a little while—but no, it was already becoming uneasy. There was no other choice. Even if she crumbled in the wake of reality, she had to face it.

Midori closed her eyes and exhaled. She forced her pounding heart to calm itself and slowly opened her eyes. A huge ball of data hurled at her at the speed of light. It shone with a terrible light, like a tiny sun; Midori had to squint. There was no hope of diverting it now. She threw her arms in front of her face to protect herself and braced for the impact. Before she could even feel it, she was swallowed up within the ball of light.

Her surroundings went instantly white, and Midori herself began to dissolve. But then the world began to regain its hue.

The truly intense overflowing of colors was incomprehensible, like the crazy mix of paints on a palette. But no sooner had Midori

cocked her head in curiosity than the swirl resolved itself into something with meaning.

It's The World.

Midori had a bird's-eye view of the Root Towns, fields, and Lost Grounds that made up *The World*. The ground was not contiguous; each place was one of the many islands that dotted a great sea. Yet this strange vista was easy to accept as *The World*. It was nothing but data, so she could simply see it as such.

Midori descended toward Mac Anu as if drawn there. She stopped above the central district and looked down. The plaza was as crowded as it always was. The only difference was Midori's point of view.

She listened closely, and the flood of data representing all the PCs' conversations rushed through her. There were intra-party conversations, too, which were normally inaudible to other PCs in *The World*.

Midori seized upon two PCs talking in one corner of the plaza. One of them was a towering GM, and the other was a delicate Blade Brandier.

Adamas. Midori looked down then descended until she was right beside them. Neither gave any indication they were aware of her presence.

"Unfortunately, we cannot disclose any personally identifying information." The GM was speaking in officious tones.

"I understand that. But I'm just worried. She might be unconscious somewhere." Adamas shook his head worriedly.

"I am not permitted to answer."

They were entirely at cross purposes. The subject was obvious.

They're talking about me.

Worried about Midori, Adamas had called a GM to try to get some kind of clue about her. Of course, he must have known from the beginning what the GM's response would be. The CC Corp did not respond to requests for personally identifying information on its users.

"Adamas," Midori tried saying his name, but he did not respond. "Adamas..." No matter how many times she tried, the outcome was the same. Midori slumped.

It was such a contradiction—here she was, so close, and yet she couldn't get him to notice her.

Midori pressed her lips into a line then turned her back on Adamas.

Standing around idly agonizing wasn't going to change anything. She would have to take action on her own.

Her dress fluttered, kissed by the air. Her body gained lift and floated up.

"Let's go."

Midori danced into the air.



Adamas kept pressing the GM. No matter what he asked the GM, there was no chance he would get any information. He was well aware of that but had to try nonetheless.

"Please, if there's anything..."

Adamas did not finish his sentence. He suddenly felt like someone had touched his shoulder and called his name. But when he turned to look around, there didn't seem to be anybody there.

Guess it was just my imagination.

He made himself accept it then turned back to the GM and tried to convince the implacable administrator yet again.

Still, that was...



Just as Midori landed on the grassy plain, she saw a dust cloud get kicked up by some impact.

"Aaaaaaagh!" A Lord Partizan flew into the air, screaming. His spinning body arced back down toward the ground, impacting with considerable force. His unpleasant face twisted in agony, and he groaned.

A black-clad Adept Rogue approached the Partizan, a large Scythe Shouxiao hefted over his shoulder. It was Haseo.

He seemed entirely unconcerned with the Lord Partizan as he strode closer, grinning threateningly.

"S-stop, stop..."

Haseo looked at the pleading Lord Partizan with disgust. "Do you know Tri-Edge?"

Slowly, the Lord Partizan managed to reply, "T-Tri Edge? No, never! I've n-never met anyone like that! Never!"

"That so?" said Haseo, his tone indifferent. He sniffed. "Then you're no good to me."

His voice was so cold it froze the very air. The next moment, his great scythe fell in a blinding arc.

He doesn't notice me either, huh? Midori felt like she'd become some kind of ghost as she stared down at the Lord Partisan's severed head. *What am I gonna do?*

She mused on the problem as she left the grassy plain. This was no time to be trapped in *The World*. She had to get back to reality as soon as she could.

At that moment, *The World* was nothing more than a giant cage that held her in. She was bird trapped within it. *Even if that's true, somewhere, there's got to be...*

Midori flew into the air, thinking of the few PCs she was acquainted with. They could be counted on a single hand.



Haseo sighed, turning his back to the felled Lord Partizan without so much as a second glance.

"All of them, they're just..." *Useless*, he finished under his breath; he began walking, not bothering to hide his obvious irritation.

He hadn't gotten but a few steps before stopping short.

"Guess I should try seeing her again."

He remembered the green-eyed Edge Punisher's slender form.

"Wouldn't mind a duel, either."

Haseo felt an elation he hadn't felt in some time. Enjoying the pleasant sensation for a moment, he disappeared.



There in the Beast Temple, Gaspard was at a total loss.

Beside him was his partner, Silabus, who held his head in his hands, his face serious.

"Wh-wh-what're we gonna do?" Gaspard said as he gazed at the treasure chest enshrined within the Beast Temple, sounding as if he was ready to stamp his feet like a frustrated toddler.

"I don't know what to tell you," replied Silabus, resigned.

Gaspard ran in frantic circles around the treasure chest. "Waaah! The treasure's right in front of our eyes!"

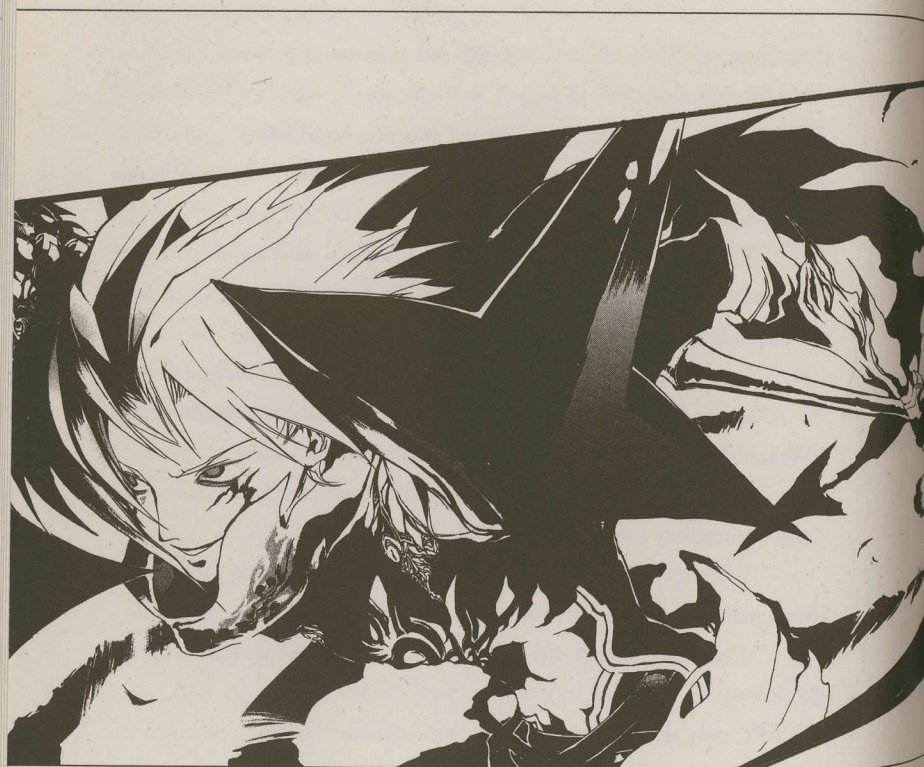
"Nothing we can do about it. Our bags are full. Unless we drop something—"

"What?! No! No, no, no!" Gaspard voiced his immediate disapproval.

"There are rare items in that chest. We can't just give up on them."

"Umm, uh..."

Midori watched the two of them agonize from one corner of the room. They never changed—which comforted Midori, somehow, but her faced hardened when she thought of her own situation again.



VOL. 6

I don't think there's anyone in The World that can sense me. Earlier, she'd been horrified at how few people she had to count on. I want to go home—to where I belong.

She wished it from the bottom of her heart. The simple problem was that she had no idea where home was. The fact terrified her. *Where do I belong?*

After significant and agonizing deliberation, Gaspard somehow managed to make a decision. "I was gonna give this Healing Water to Midori, but I guess I can throw it away."

"That seems reasonable."

"It does, right? It's not super-valuable or anything." Or so Gaspard said, but he seemed unable to actually do it.

"We can come again," suggested Silabus.

"Yeah, we can. We'll show this place!" said Gaspard with enthusiasm, turning back to the treasure chest—whereupon he saw emptiness where the chest in question had been. "Huh?"

Gaspard cocked his head in confusion at what he saw. Next to him, Silabus' mouth dropped open.

They casually looked behind them only to see a PC stealthily tiptoeing away.

"Eek, thief!"

Midori was still, there in the darkness, as the countless brilliant lights came and went.

She didn't know how she'd gotten here, but when she'd come to, she'd flown back to this place, as though her subconscious had brought her here, deciding *this* was her home.

And what that implied was...

The worst imaginable scenario played through her head. It was the story from which despair beckoned. If she couldn't cope, madness would be inescapable.

But even if she did handle it, her head was already in a state of panic, and she could hardly make normal decisions. The more she thought about it, the more agitated she became—the more uneasy her mind.

"I..." She spoke deliberately, as if to confirm her existence. "I... I am in here."

That much she was certain of. Her five operating senses gave ample proof of the entity called *her*.

"But I probably don't exist in the real world." As soon as she thought it, her doubts melted away.

If she were something like an artificial intelligence, this unreal world she found herself in—and her lack of memories of the real world—would be easily explained.

Though if that was the case, she wouldn't just accept it. A chill ran over her; goose bumps appeared on her skin. Her face was pale white, and she was bathed in cold sweat.

These feelings... even they are just illusion?!

She would not allow this. She couldn't accept that she was nothing more than a construct of zeros and ones, and she didn't want to. But every circumstance pointed to that worst of all possible scenarios.

The memories she didn't have. The fact that she couldn't log-out. And above all, the fact that she was comfortable in this

phantasmal world. She had a feeling that all of these things pointed to her true nature.

Her inability to access those memories suggested that she hadn't existed to create them in the first place but had simply one day been derived from some other source and was placed in *The World*.

It followed that she had become a PK and slaughtered PCs because she was simply carrying out the basic parameters of an Edge Punisher.

The reason behind the choice of Edge Punisher was unclear, but there was a possibility that even that had been a logical choice.

"It's all just..."

Having arrived at answers so desperately close to the truth, Midori was losing sight of herself. This was the conclusion she'd been so instinctually afraid of. Though she now knew why her subconscious had warned her so, she couldn't avoid it any longer.

But just accepting that is impossible.

Midori fell to her knees, holding her head in her hands. She didn't know what process had given rise to this world. But she had a body, she had a will—and even if it had been an imaginary place, she had made her way in *The World*. Whatever the truth might be, she couldn't just meekly accept it.

I don't want to die.

As she stared down this unthinkable situation, she heard a small voice. It was a girl's voice. It was weak, so weak it seemed it might fade away at any moment. But it was unmistakably there, echoing through Midori's mind.

It stirred her soul, setting her body aquiver. There was a desperate wish hidden in the voice. That wish came through so clearly that it was almost painful. She didn't know who the voice's owner was, but she felt like she'd heard it before. She didn't remember where, but it seemed driven by a sense of intense longing and nostalgia.

I don't want to die.

The voice welled up from her body, from every cell that composed it, as if accusing her, over and over. At length, the voice became a cry. Each of Midori's cells screamed, closing in on her from within her own body.

Who—?! Midori asked, but there was no answer. The voices continued ceaselessly. Don't...

Midori held her head, pulling at her hair, then drawing her Dragonblossom and swinging it wildly. *Don't talk to me!*

She slashed with her broadsword as if to drive away the voices, but she continued to be assaulted by this formless enemy. Then, as if in response to her, the voices stopped.

The sound of Midori's heavy breathing echoed through the otherwise quiet world.

"Somebody..."

The Dragonblossom fell from Midori's hand to the floor. It instantly dissolved, turning into tiny grains of light before flowing away.

Midori collapsed to a floor that she could not even be sure existed, burying her face in her hands. She sobbed at the injustice

of it all, as though she were shouldering all the unhappiness of the world herself. But even that pathetic figure felt like a lie.

That was when Midori's body started to disintegrate, beginning with her fingertips. Her clothing's texture map began to drift away like scattering leaves. Underneath it was not skin, but a simple, featureless object.

"No."

There was no pain. Instead, she felt the horrifying sensation of her existence itself coming undone.

Her textures continued to come apart. With them went her mind.

"Nooooooooo!"

The instant she screamed, her remaining textures vanished in one fell swoop, swirling away like blowing snow.

It was an arrestingly beautiful sight.

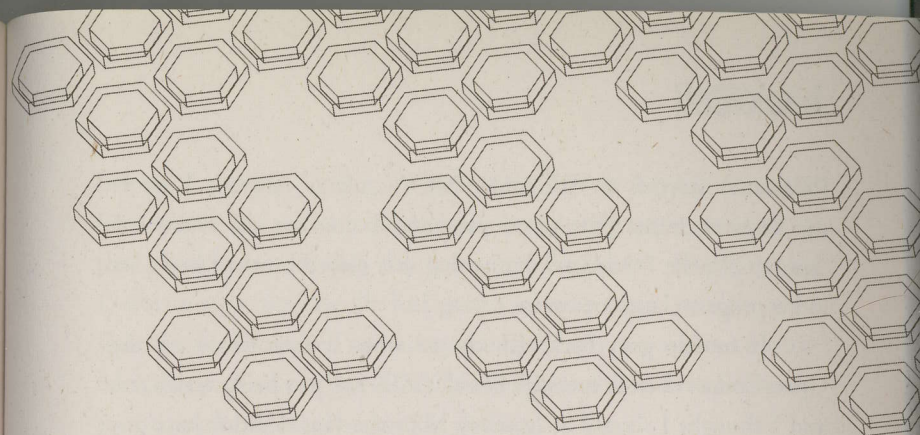
What was left behind was a pitiful, featureless body, like an undressed doll.

"Aaaaaaah!" Midori's scream echoed through the world.

Her body crumbled, and with it, her mind.

It scattered there in space, becoming pure data.

A single ray of light appeared.



AFTERWORD

Why, it's already been a year since I first heard of *.back*!

My goodness, the days certainly do slip by, don't they?

At the moment, I'm completely obsessed with *.back*—a little too obsessed, one might say—but even a year ago, I didn't know the first thing about it.

How little did I know, you ask? Around the time Ms. Kawasaki was writing *Another Birth*, I would get e-mails with "Kite did such-and-such" in them, to which I would reply: "What's Kite?" You'd think my ignorance would know some limits! [smile]

But if I really think about it, even then, I was already connected to *.back*. Maybe this is what they call fate? *.back* moves in mysterious ways...

Upon reflection, I've gotten to do all sorts of work for *.back*—on the CyberConnect2 Web site, Macchan (Hiroshi Matsuyama,

.hack//Cell

President) started a "Welcome, Mr. Suzukaze" thread; I wrote the original drama that was a pre-order bonus for the reissue of *.hack//G.U.*; the "Odeden" drama that was played on the Haseo Set radio program, and lots more.

It mostly goes back, I'd say, to when I first wrote on the CyberConnect2 site's message board. *CELL* was just being serialized, and I thought I should at least say hi to the fans. I didn't have any ulterior motives—it was just that simple.

Thanks to that, early that year, I got whacked upside the head by Macchan, but in the end, it seemed like the fans were happy.

I just ignored anybody else that was involved and pretty much talked about whatever I wanted—I got bleeped out a lot, to be honest. I think Macchan lost some hair over it.

Now my madness has even been visited upon the CyberConnect2 Web site. Lately, I've been working with a manga artist, and for my part it's been fun—yes, fun indeed.

I can see you all snickering now: "He seems to have gotten rather into all of this."

Yes, yes I have.

...Oh, right! I should talk about *.hack//CELL* before I forget about it.

About two months before the serial started running, I had a meeting with Macchan and Uchi P (Producer Uchiyama, of Namco Bandai).

The thrust of the story wasn't exactly set, but just knowing that it was going to be starting was lovely. Incidentally, as mentioned

AFTERWORD

before, I was still at the "What's Kite?" level. Anyway, it might have been a bit rude of me to have the meeting without finishing the previous works, but I'd gotten as far as the fourth game. Unfortunately, my save file had gotten erased just as I was about to fight the final boss, so I wound up doing the meeting without having been able to finish it. (Incidentally, I still haven't beaten it. Seriously, someone please just show me the ending.)

The story they gave me at the meeting was quite simple.

"Just write whatever you like."

That's what they told me.

Really? I thought. *Is that really going to be okay?* I was pretty worried.

I figured there was a good chance I'd come up with something completely ridiculous. They didn't know me from Adam—they had a lot of guts, leaving it all in my hands.

But what the heck—they'd let me do whatever I'd wanted, so that's what I did.

That's where the direction for *.hack//CELL* came from, I guess.

I thought I'd do something a little different from the *.hack* novelizations that had already been published, so I tried all kinds of things... I hope they worked!

Anyway! About the time this book comes out, we'll be entering the countdown to *.hack//G.U. Reminisce*. Oh, and *.hack//ROOTS* will be hitting its climax, too. The staff of the *.hack//G.U. The World* magazine must be working so hard that they're crying tears of blood.

.hack//Cell

CELL, likewise, is turning the corner and charging into the final stretch. I hope you'll enjoy the story of Midori—and "Midori"—right up through the end.

And with that, I wish to continue to express all my thanks to everyone involved in this project.

—Ryo Suzukaze, 08/01/06